

SOME GREAT ENGLISH NOVELS

Studies in the Art of Fiction

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FOREWORD

THIS book was conceived under the title of "Old Enchantments"; and that title, though abandoned, would have had a reference to my purpose. To go back to old enchantments is a very pleasant act, yet how idly, how passively, do we usually make this return! If the enchantment, especially, be a book, we take it to a comfortable chair or a shady bank and let its familiar magic charm us in delightful languor, forgetting the shock, the tension, the total absorption of our first submission. Too often we keep our alertness for the present, and look to the past only for relaxation.

Some early enthusiasms, that will not stand retrospective criticism, were obviously imperfect, as each of us must confess; but, as a rule, if we take the trouble, we shall find, on second reading, how little of a great work of art we had at first taken in.

In an age when the output of new and interesting books is so vast, a critic, above all, needs no little resolution if his return to older

works is to be more than a cursory glance. My own primary impulse has been fortified by a secondary purpose—that of getting away from commonplace historical retrospect. The general criticism of individual authors' works as a whole, throughout all but the latest stages of our literature, is abundant; historical developments have been adequately worked out; but little space or attention is devoted to the appreciation of single works, and that is a real business of criticism.

I hope that these studies are neither sterile nor negative. Mr. Percy Lubbock's admirable book *The Craft of Fiction* has shown how illuminating discussions of this kind can be: certainly they call into play all a critic's concentration, besides exposing all his weaknesses. Moreover, painters copy old masterpieces to probe the secrets of their craft, and I suggest that both novelists and critics would learn something if they sometimes imitated the painters by patiently transcribing some old masterpiece of literature. However, if life is too short for this practice, there is no excuse for neglecting an exercise analogous to the intense concentration of a painter or a sculptor upon the single work of a master.

The two last chapters, which are in

the nature of appendages, appeared in the *London Mercury*. I express my obligations to Mr. H. Festing Jones, Messrs. Jonathan Cape, Messrs. Heinemann, and Messrs. Longmans, Green and Co., for permission to quote extensively from copyright works.

ORLO WILLIAMS.

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SOME GREAT ENGLISH NOVELS

I

TOM JONES

“FOR my own part, when I seek to analyse the impression left upon my mind by *Tom Jones*, I feel no impulse to compare it with any other book, but rather there rises before my eyes a vision of one of the great ships of old ploughing with spread sails and laden hold over a sunlit sea. The winds blow fair, and from her deck, as she speeds upon her way, the deep voices of sailors fling to the air some lusty old chantey, simple and victorious.”

In these words M. Aurélien Digeon, an intelligent Frenchman of our own day, writing in praise of Fielding,* opens his chapter on *Tom Jones*. One might hold that the application of such an image to so profoundly

* *The Novels of Fielding*, by Aurélien Digeon : Routledge, 1925.

unnautical a book was inappropriate, but one cannot deny the power of the image to evoke response, especially in the mind of an Englishman. M. Digeon—well aware of his act, we may be sure—appeals to emotion before he proceeds to criticism, and he skilfully chooses the vehicle of his appeal. Few could resist it. A whole anthology of English prose and poetry might be compiled to illustrate that manifold and ever-fresh quality of beauty which has been ascribed to a full-rigged ship, with all sails set, ploughing her dazzling furrow through a sunlit sea. It is our delight in the harmonious proportion between hull and canvas, in the trimness of the sails and the curve of the bow, in majestic, easy motion over a moving surface, in the contrast of bright and sparkling colours, and in the more general ideas of freedom, nobility, contentment and work well done which makes our response so easy, so imperative. A fine ship in a fair breeze—happy is the author whose book can leave so vivid an image in a reader's mind: he may feel indeed that he has fulfilled his purpose. As the psychologists say, it is an emotive, not a logical, judgment; but it is none the worse for that.

The image does not matter so much as the

feeling which aroused it—the feeling of excitement and exceptional well-being which in a happy moment attends the contemplation of a successful work of art. The presence of some such feeling, which is different from a drowsed satisfaction or the mere appeasement of a desire, is a sign that the artist, with his book, his poem, his picture or his piece of music, has communicated to us something, at all events, of his artistic idea: its absence, correspondingly, proves that, though he may have interested or amused us, he has failed of his main purpose. The failure, of course, may be of ourselves or of the particular moment: upon the eve of execution or in the throes of toothache a man might be obdurate to the poetry of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven. But, given a situation of bodily ease and an attention alert but pliant, this familiar but peculiar felicity is what we expect from a work of art. It is a criterion of the enjoyment of art, if not of art itself.

Certainly, if the reading of such a book as *Tom Jones*—one conceived on so large a scale, so dramatically constructed, so vivid in its portraiture and so strong in its mental framework—were not attended, at its close, by a feeling akin to M. Digeon's, one would have

to diagnose a failure somewhere, either in Fielding or his reader, and look about for its causes. Time, however, has already shown that *Tom Jones* succeeds in the majority of cases, though not always so overwhelmingly. Certain temperaments have been antagonised by its so-called "coarseness" or "vulgarity"; other temperaments have found it commonplace and at the level, as a modern writer has put it, of after-dinner speaking. But the majority of readers and, I think, of good critics, after following the rich and comic history to its end, will close the last volume with some mental ejaculation of "splendid!" or "magnificent!", though they may have been forced to make criticisms in detail or even extensive reservations. After all, you may thrill to the sight of a ship and yet not care for the cut of her jib. Thackeray, for instance, thought that Tom Jones himself smelt a little too strong for Sophia's drawing-room, in spite of the rankness to which Squire Western had accustomed that dutiful young woman; but this was only Thackeray's way of complaining that the reader's legitimate sentiments towards a hero of romance and his consent to such a hero's living happily ever afterwards with the lovely heroine should be

claimed for a sensual and lusty child of nature whose fastidiousness was anything but remarkable. He was angry with Jones: "too much of the plum cake and rewards of life fall to that boisterous, swaggering young scapegrace," he said. Yet his ejaculations of general admiration are almost breathless.

"What a genius! What a bright-eyed intelligence and observation! What a wholesome hatred for meanness and knavery! What a vast sympathy! What a cheerfulness! What a manly relish for life! What a love of human kind! What a poet is here!—watching, meditating, brooding, creating! What multitudes of truth has that man left behind him! What generations he has taught to laugh wisely and fairly! What scholars he has formed and accustomed to the exercise of thoughtful humour and the manly play of wit!"

Each one of us will be conscious of similar oppositions: even M. Digeon thinks the admirably told story of the Man on the Hill is dreary and out of place, and that the character of the hypocritical Blifil, compared with Molière's Tartuffe, is something of a failure.

These oppositions, these internal protests of

the mind, are as interesting and as important as the broad assents which seem to overwhelm them. *Tom Jones* is nearly two hundred years old, and it has held its place. We may take the broad assents, with the small percentage of broad dissents, for granted. *Tom Jones* is a masterpiece, Fielding is a great novelist, and so forth. It is unnecessary either to compete with or qualify the ecstatic final periods of Thackeray's lecture. Each of us can decide for himself to how many marks of exclamation his own emotion will run; and indeed, if they were all removed and direct speech substituted for rhetorical apostrophe, Thackeray's outburst would be almost unassailable as a cold statement of fact.

Upon broad assents of this nature many minds seem to meet and, if ever, achieve the apparent impossibility of thinking the same thoughts; and it is often supposed to be the function of criticism to pave the way to them. No doubt the connection of a number of particular critical judgments into an organised system is a highly useful, and very difficult, thing to do; it is the evidence and test of good taste. But if the unity of organisation were reached at the price of eliminating all smaller distinctions, the value of the result would be

doubtful. For example, Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Dostoievsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Tom Jones* are by general consent great works of art by great writers; but assent to this proposition might be, though genuine, of so vague a character that it would possess hardly any critical value at all. The really valuable feat of criticism—one that only a mind of the highest order could adequately accomplish—would be to correlate the experiences of reading these three books into an intelligible system, while fully appreciating and exposing the salient and manifold differences that distinguished them. A lesser mind, aware of all that such a task implied, might well shrink from it, given that, in the particular instance, he admired all three novels; the inevitable differences in the quality of his admirations alone would be the most baffling things to describe clearly. His emotional attitude in one case might be overwhelming; in another his admiration might be almost cold; yet he might be constrained, on reflection, to hold the second work more valuable than the first. Such a mind, which is all that the writer can lay claim to, may justifiably hesitate before it attempts the final reconciliation, and may possibly contribute more

valuably to the subject if it stops short at recording the oppositions and the conflicts of one particular experience. It is possible, moreover, that the mere recording of them may bring into prominence the particular quality in this particular book which at the end resolves all conflicts and prompts sincere admiration.

The fact is that, while ready to subscribe to any reasoned panegyric of *Tom Jones*, I prefer to it all the other three of Fielding's novels, *Joseph Andrews* for the portrait of Parson Adams, *Jonathan Wild* for the sustained and brilliant irony, and *Amelia* for its progress to a far more interesting analysis of character than appears in any of its predecessors. If it be true that *Amelia* was Fielding's favourite, his preference is intelligible, for in that book, without losing his masterly hold upon human manners, he was closing a powerful grip upon that more mysterious and more exciting organism, the human mind. The reasons for these preferences are, perhaps, worth amplifying, since they are concerned with some of the chief grounds upon which novels are praised or blamed. To begin with, the creation of a type-character, lovingly remembered and

identified by generations of readers, if it embodies a mere eccentricity as do Lewis Carroll's comic Mad Hatter or Dickens' inhuman Quilp, may not always have a high artistic merit, but when it has verisimilitude and broad proportions it is always a notable performance. Had he written nothing else Fielding would have been remembered for Parson Adams as Manzoni for Don Abbondio, the cowardly but human village priest of his only novel. This power of enshrining in one fictitious person the comedy and tragedy of some common human failing or impulse, or the glory of some generally prized nobility of mind, seems to have most belonged to the greatest writers of drama and fiction.

Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Tartuffe, Falstaff, Uncle Toby, Jérôme Coignard are triumphs of the imagination; and, to the common reader, at all events, in nothing does Shakespeare seem so strikingly to transcend the dramatists of his day than in this supreme plastic gift. His great characters are like moulds of a master-craftsman which indelibly stamp the fluid impressions of reader after reader into imperishable forms. This gift is not by any means the whole of dramatic

as the complete portrait of a boorish squire belonging to that state of society which, with so boundless a magnanimity, he understood and criticised. From the moment when the squire is first introduced with *thé* demure, ironic description of his typical afternoon:

"It was Mr. Western's custom every afternoon, as soon as he was drunk, to hear his daughter play on the harpsichord; for he was a great lover of music, and perhaps, had he lived in town, might have passed for a connoisseur; for he always excepted against the finest compositions of Mr. Handel . . ." to his uproarious whisper: "so much the better for Tom; for d——n me if he shan't ha' the tousling her," ¹⁷⁹ he dominates the stage and enlivens the action upon every appearance. The speeches from his foul lips, whether he be wrangling with his sister-in-law or devotedly abusing Sophia, have a natural force and intensity far above those of the other characters. Brutal, coarse, tyrannical, selfish, but neither a booby, an idiot nor a coward, choleric but affectionate, boisterous in friendship, violent in opposition, powerful of hand but weak of argument, drunken, muscular, lurid of speech, Squire Western is imperishable, though his living counterparts are happily few. Other

hands, Molière, Congreve, have essayed this type, but none have fashioned it with Fielding's roundness and vigour. And yet I cannot place this virtue on the level of that which makes Parson Adams, into whose fashioning has gone a far wider, deeper, truer and more poetic combination of insight and feeling. A reader's response to Squire Western, rich as it will be, must be on a lower level, I think, than his response to Parson Adams.

As regards irony, I need not labour a comparison between *Tom Jones* and *Jonathan Wild*: the first is the most purely comic of all Fielding's works, but the second is unquestionably the most brilliant, and in all our literature of irony only Swift's *Tale of a Tub* stands above it. We know little of the phases of mind through which Fielding was passing when he wrote that astonishing criticism of human society. M. Digeon seems right in supposing that it was begun purely as a political attack on Walpole, but that it was resumed and completed after Walpole's fall as something far deeper and more universal. We do not love *Jonathan Wild*, the book or the character; indeed, we shiver at what they reveal, for there is an accomplished and remorseless villain shown to us acting upon all the motives and

and in *Amelia* the penetrating analysis and dramatisation of motive; but in *Tom Jones* this counterweight is something far more massive, and I should be inclined to call it the dominance of the author's spirit at the culmination of his first maturity. Fielding was happy again when he wrote it, not yet overburdened in body or mind by his work as a magistrate, and he appeared to have a firm grasp of life in all its essentials. No man, if he live, can prolong such a moment, for life, like a restive horse, has tricks to unseat the most secure. Experience was to bring Fielding more doubts and more pities, but for the moment he could take the epic or comic view of humanity, laughing much, no longer angry and pitying only a little, as he looked down from that seat in the clouds to which his genius had lifted him. To the epic or comic poet a pinnacle of this kind is necessary: like Homer, he must know how the gods laugh over their banquet on Olympus when they observe the antics of puny mortals. Yet only the power of his own mind, not the gods themselves, will so lift him up; and he who tries to fly without the wings comes down like Icarus. Fielding had the wings, and, when he wrote *Tom Jones*, he sat laughing with the gods. There is something

superhuman, almost inhuman, in utterances of comedy when supreme upon the heights, but they are comprehensive and compelling. And a sun seems to glow upon the art of a great comic writer, as it glowed upon Squire Allworthy in his garden, investing it with radioactive properties which persist even when its outward glamour has faded with years.

It is some emanation of this kind which makes the reading of *Tom Jones*, no less than of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a valuable and invigorating experience. And though Chaucer, being a poet, had the sweeter voice, there is a strong kinship between these works and their writers. Both, from the pinnacle of comedy and with the wide-sweeping glance of comic genius, looked down upon contemporary England, and from all that they saw and heard, the scenes and faces, the shouts and cries, the gossip and the laughter, they built the lasting fabric of great art. They transformed the commonplace and reduced order to confusion without assailing truth: indeed, they reveal truth, for it is the virtue of such art to clarify the mistier impressions of lesser men. Any one of us, in a moment of pride, may flatter himself that he knows the British scenes and the British characters—those rich materials for

contemplation; but what account could any of us give, to ourselves or to another, so wide, so lucid and so penetrating as our great comic poets have already given? If for particular knowledge we must look to science, it is art and poetry which enshrine the general. Like Chaucer and Shakespeare and, even, Dickens, Fielding, especially in *Tom Jones*, is not only a great builder but a great teacher, not in the pedagogic, hortatory sense, but as the incorporator of valuable knowledge and experience in a lasting and magnificent form.

We see, then, an added force in M. Digeon's simile that likened *Tom Jones* to a great ship. There may be more grace in a schooner and more excitement in a lively yacht, but we cannot deny admiration to the clipper. And Fielding's clipper *Tom Jones*, one of the earliest built, has remained, through all changes of fashion and task, a model of its particular kind; for its ample yet stately lines have a fundamental relation to those of our national British temperament.

II

MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT

ONE sits down to write about Dickens with an acute sense of discouragement. (From Taine to Chesterton he has been exhaustively criticised, discussed and appreciated) it would be so much better to sit and just read him. So that any reader who straightway shuts this book and takes down *Martin Chuzzlewit* from the shelf has my sympathy. Yet, if he feels inclined to talk about it, when he has again regretfully closed the book, he will sympathise with me. To talk about what one loves, be it an old love or a new, is but natural, and for me (*Martin Chuzzlewit* is an old love.) I took it up first, at eight years old—not more—to while away a summer afternoon at Hampstead in a green field, now red with serried brick, upon the slopes of Frognal. It was too tender an age, no doubt, and my sisters' nurse certainly thought so, for I remember her remarking severely to a neighbouring nurse that it

was "not a nice book for a young gentleman on a Sunday afternoon." The kind of niceness that she meant was more obvious to me than any want of it in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for I read the story as a strange enchantment with only fitful glimmerings of its meaning. The worldly and gruesome dealings of Jonas Chuzzlewit and Tigg made no impression on a childish mind, Mrs. Gamp awoke no laughter, Pecksniff seemed a dreary character, the excellence of Tom Pinch and the sweetness of Ruth were equally ineffective. Indeed, I regret to confess, as early evidence of a sensual nature, that the one passage which I now remember to have caused me exquisite delight and which I read over and over again, was the description of the sherry cobbler wherewith Mark Tapley comforted the despondent Martin.

"He produced a very large tumbler, piled up to the brim with little blocks of clear transparent ice, through which one or two thin slices of lemon, and a golden liquid of delicious appearance, appealed from the still depths below, to the loving eye of the spectator. . . ."

Thus was formed my childish intage of an ideal drink, lovingly cherished throughout adolescence until, some twenty years later,

realisation—as always—shattered its magic beauty for ever. Sherry, I now sadly maintain, is better undiluted. Yet, on reading that happy incident again, a ghost of the old enchantment rises up to remove my discouragement with a reviving draught. (For a draught of Dickens *is* reviving and full of potent flavour. How could it be otherwise with a writer who loved so widely, felt so keenly, and talked so magnificently of the many things he loved?)

This magnificent gusto is one of Dickens' greatest qualities, and one which, more than any other, must cause discouragement to spirits not so gifted. In the art of writing, as in all other arts, much can be learned, much acquired by observation and practice, but super-vitality is a natural gift that no toil will produce. One cannot compete with it, but one can at least admire it, for its value is inestimable. It is the supreme creative force which runs in multitudinous channels through the universe, and when an extra measure of it runs in the veins of an artist it lifts him and his art up on to a level to which only like spirits can ascend. Seldom are critics and commentators endowed with this divine energy, for, if they were, they too would be creators.

They, therefore, must contemplate these more fortunate beings from below. They may still criticise acutely and make just comparisons, on the condition that they remember they are looking upwards. A semblance of looking downwards falsifies all their words. Looking upwards does not imply blind worship, for nothing human is perfect. (There are imperfections and idiosyncrasies in Dickens which need not be denied.) *Martin Chuzzlewit*, begun without a complete view of its development and issued in parts, as it was composed, is not exempt from them; yet no work of Dickens' is more amply sustained from beginning to end by that inexhaustible electric energy which flowed into his pen. (Compared with Dickens, Fielding is staid, Balzac often laboured and Tolstoy heavy.) (His was not a pumped-up nervous energy, tense but intermittent: it was an elemental fluid finding a natural and happy outlet. He seems to breathe oxygen, not common air;) and perhaps it is the sluggishness of common air to common breathers which, in unlucky moments, makes Dickens' exuberance almost intolerable. . Thus, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, where there is little exuberance of pathos, one may find oneself overpowered by the tender jocularly of the

love passages between Westlock and Ruth Pinch; yet, even here, the fault is not wholly with Dickens.

The creative energy in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is truly stupendous. Not exhausted by carrying along an exciting story, by the creation of such characters as Pecksniff and his daughters, Mark Tapley, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Mrs. Gamp, Mrs. Lupin, Mrs. Todgers, Tom Pinch and Ruth, Montague Tigg, Poll Sweedlepipe and Bailey, and the addition of such minor personages as Colonel Diver, Jefferson Brick, Mrs. Hominy, Elihu Scadder, Elijah Pogram, Nadgett, Dr. Jobling, Mould and Betsey Prig, it runs over to animate the incidentals with its wonderful vivacity. How it snatches up the reader at the very opening of Chapter II—the first real chapter—with the evocation of an autumn day, when the declining sun “like a sudden flash of memory or spirit kindling up the mind of an old man, . . . shed a glory upon the scene, in which its departed youth and freshness seemed to live again”! In such a passage as this, which runs on for three pages, what charms and surprises is not only the youth and beauty of the picture but the limpidity of Dickens’ eloquence. It is no piece of elaborate “fine writing,” no mosaic of

tortured phraseology, but a description of the utmost simplicity, naturally but beautifully phrased, which does nothing but reproduce, though upon a higher level, the ordinary Englishman's impression of a country village on an autumn afternoon.

“The fallen leaves, with which the ground was strewn, gave forth a pleasant fragrance, and subduing all harsh sounds of distant feet and wheels, created a repose in gentle unison with the light scattering of seed hither and thither by the distant husbandman, and with the noiseless passage of the plough as it turned up the rich brown earth, and wrought a graceful pattern in the stubbled fields.”

The sun goes down, the wind rises, and the eloquence rises with it from its quiet beginning to a jovial personification of the wind.

“Out upon the angry wind! how from sighing, it began to bluster round the merry forge, banging at the wicket, and grumbling in the chimney, as if it bullied the jolly bellows for doing anything to order. And what an impotent swaggerer it was too, for all its noise; for if it had any influence on that hoarse companion, it was but to make him roar his cheerful

song the louder, and by consequence to make the fire burn the brighter, and the sparks to dance more gaily yet: at length, they whizzed so madly round and round, that it was too much for such a surly wind to bear: so off it flew with a howl: giving the old sign before the ale-house door such a cuff as it went, that the Blue Dragon was more rampant than usual ever afterwards, and indeed, before Christmas, reared clean out of its crazy frame."

And so on till Mr. Pecksniff is found, lying on his back at the bottom of the steps. (What an easy mastery, what a natural vigour, what an absence of artificiality! Dickens is truly a poet in these happy moments, when the force within him crystallises in musical, rhythmical and pure English his intense reactions to scenes beautiful, invigorating and delightful.) The famous descriptions of the Blue Dragon with Mrs. Lupin "tight as a gooseberry," of Tom Pinch's drive on a bright winter's morning, or Martin's walk with Tom into Salisbury and the dinner with John Westlock, of the ship buffeted by the storm, of Tom Pinch's coach-drive with its "Yoho! Yoho!", of the London Wharf and of the storm in which Jonas and Tigg were upset are not in the least

“ beauties ” to be detached from an otherwise humdrum narrative; they are all of a piece with Mrs. Gamp’s immortal conversation and Dr. Jobling’s discourse upon Mr. Crimble’s leg. (They are all sparks from the fire in the great writer’s soul.) It did not need a rapt contemplation of beauty to call them forth. Dickens had only to love anything, and immediately that love blew the bellows.

(He loved, for instance, that smoky old London where he had toiled and suffered as a lad, so that when a spark of his love went out, in consequence, to illuminate Todgers’s district he made it even more inspiring than Ruth Pinch’s pretty face.)

“ Strange solitary pumps were found near Todgers’s hiding themselves for the most part in blind alleys, and keeping company with fire-ladders. There were churches also by dozens, with many a ghostly little churchyard, all overgrown with such straggling vegetation as springs up spontaneously from damp, and graves, and rubbish. In some of these dingy resting-places which bore much the same analogy to green churchyards, as the pots of earth for mignonette and wall-flower in the windows overlooking them did to rustic gardens,

there were trees; tall trees; still putting forth their leaves in each succeeding year, with such a languishing remembrance of their kind (so one might fancy, looking on their sickly boughs) as birds in cages have of theirs. Here, paralysed old watchmen guarded the bodies of the dead at night, year after year, until at last they joined that solemn brotherhood. . . . In like manner, there were gloomy courtyards in these parts, into which few but belated wayfarers ever strayed, and where vast bags and packs of goods, upward or downward bound, were for ever dangling between heaven and earth from lofty cranes. There were more trucks near Todgers's than you would suppose a whole city could ever need; not active trucks, but a vagabond race, for ever lounging in the narrow lanes before their masters' doors and stopping up the pass. . . . In the throats and maws of dark no-thoroughfares near Todgers's, individual wine-merchants and wholesale dealers in grocery-ware had perfect little towns of their own; and, deep among the foundations of these buildings, the ground was undermined and burrowed out into stables, where cart-horses, troubled by rats, might be heard on a quiet Sunday rattling their halters, as disturbed spirits in tales

of haunted houses are said to clank their chains.”

It is an impressive thought that these passages of animated description, absolute as their artistic value is, have but a minor importance in Dickens' whole achievement. Sown freely up and down all his works, from the *Pickwick Papers* onwards, so far from “making” those works, they are but the framework and the ornaments to which an extraordinarily rich creative impulse has given the same life and variety as to the central features. Yet it does not do to minimise or ignore their felicity. Of course it is easier to describe a scene than to create and completely realise a character, but Dickens' descriptions are not mere descriptions, they are themselves inanimate characters.) It is plain that he regarded them with the same affection and excitement as his men and women: the neighbourhood of Todgers's was no less dear to him than Nadgett or the fruity porter of the Anglo-Bengalee Company, and the glow of a frosty morning in lusty limbs no less stimulating than Ruth Pinch's blushes. When Dickens, as nearly always, completely commanded his material, he made every particle of it live, human and natural alike, and

every living particle radio-active to its neighbours. And it is this animating power, never more intense than in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which seems in his novels to imbue, not only human beings, but sun and wind, walls and windows, coaches and carts, bottles, dishes, glasses and jugs, with a spark of Dickens' genius: a broom, a counterpane, a warming-pan take on a wholly different air, when Dickens introduces them, from what they wear in any other novels. The trucks near Todgers's, "not active trucks, but a vagabond race, for ever lounging in the narrow lanes," cannot be simply material: they are bewitched into movement and given a physiognomy. Even where Dickens had not complete mastery of his matter, this demoniac energy pulled him through, as in the American scenes of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In these episodes Dickens was relying, not upon a deep knowledge or a long and sympathetic acquaintance, but upon the impressions of a voyage. They were introduced in the hope of attracting the public, which had given a disappointing reception to the earlier parts, and they were deliberately intended to illustrate the ludicrous side of American life. They could be taken bodily out of *Martin Chuzzlewit* without any artistic loss, and yet what an extraordinary

vigour they have! The conversations of Colonel Diver and Major Hannibal Chollop, the mid-day meal at Pawkins's and Elijah Pogram's levee at the moment when Miss Toppit and Miss Codger are introduced by Mrs. Hominy are things which do not easily fade from the memory, and tend to efface that sense of disconnectedness which we justly feel when Martin himself suddenly abandons the rôle of a selfish young man to be reformed by suffering, and becomes the ironical interrogator of exaggeratedly conceited Americans. Yes, it was right to be enchanted by the sherry cobbler, as a boy: the true Dickens was as surely in that exotic glass as in the bumpers at the Blue Dragon which Mark and Martin exultantly shared on their return.

(A creative force such as that with which Dickens was endowed is, in itself, nothing but free energy: it has no will, no consciousness, no direction, but all these are given to it by the great artist. (What was the direction which Dickens gave to his super-abundant energy? It was to the expression in imaginative form of three guiding emotions which one may call, shortly, love, humour and moral indignation.) Any of his great novels might be taken to

illustrate this view and in each one the relative proportions of these three elements would be found different. *Martin Chuzzlewit*, however, is admirably representative of the mixture, especially as it is not overcharged with that form of love which is pity. Certainly, the pity of a truly great mind contemplating the world is one of the human emotions most nearly approaching the divine, but (pity may degenerate, as it sometimes did in Dickens' novels, into pathos;) and the defect of pathos is that it isolates a human situation till it loses all proportion to its surroundings. The pathetic could not present itself to the eye of God. (There are places in *Martin Chuzzlewit* where Dickens' love takes this imperfect form.) His portrait of Tom Pinch, for instance, has many excellences as the presentation of a simple, humble and upright character, content with his lot, easily deceived and wanting only in that energy which moulds circumstance; but Dickens' apostrophes on his behalf have an excess of sentimentality.

“Tom, Tom! The man in all this world most confident in his sagacity and shrewdness . . . shall never find, oh, never find, be sure of that, the time come home to him, when all

his wisdom is an idiot's folly, weighed against a simple heart!"

Dickens makes a disproportionate claim on our admiration for Tom Pinch, and we recognise the disproportion when we compare this character with Sterne's Uncle Toby—a wholly superior creation. Again, having made uproarious fun of Mercy Pecksniff's artificial frivolity, Dickens would carry us over to an excess of tenderness on her behalf when she becomes the humble, tearful and brow-beaten wife of Jonas Chuzzlewit.

"Not with a blow? Yes. Stern truth against the base-souled villain: with a blow.

"No angry cries; no loud reproaches. Even her weeping and her sobs were stifled by her clinging round him. She only said, repeating it in agony of heart, How could he, could he, could he! And lost utterance in tears.

"Oh woman, God beloved in old Jerusalem! The best among us need deal lightly with thy faults, if only for the punishment thy nature will endure, in bearing heavy evidence against us on the Day of Judgment!"

Truly there is a discord in this sudden trans-

formation of the sprightly Merry who mocked her "griffin" into the type of all suffering womanhood.

(Dickens' love took higher forms than these; and "love" is, perhaps, an equivocal expression for his emotion. It was not that love which is a complete self-surrender, nor that which embraces everything in a contemplative serenity, still less a parching thirst for some supra-mundane ideal of beauty: it was rather an intense rapture in all those aspects of the world as it is which pleasantly roused his acute sensibility, whether the aspect were a glass of beer, a rattling coach, or an oddity of character. He was an enthusiast for quality wherever he perceived it,) and, just as his enthusiasm for natural scenes and objects found its outlet in those magnificent passages of description to which I have already referred, so his enthusiasm for human characters issued in creations like Pecksniff, Sajrey Gamp, Mrs. Lupin, Tigg, and the rest. (Nor was it only in character as such that he felt this rapture, but in the interaction of characters. Human natures in contact are explosive, and Dickens loved an explosion, whether of laughter or hate, for itself.)

He did not place his explosive elements

together and sit delicately apart exclaiming "How interesting!" and wondering what would happen. Not at all. He rather strengthened the charges and then fired the train himself with infinite glee. (What we call Dickens' tendency to melodrama is simply this love of an explosion.) He was determined that there should be no mistake about it, no half-hearted pop behind the scenes, but that everybody should share the fun or the thrill. Thus, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, his rapture not only gives us the magnificent scenes of comedy—Pecksniff's welcome of Martin Chuzzlewit, the dinner at Todgers's, Mrs. Gamp's tea-making and the quarrel of Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Prig—but it enhances the senility of Anthony Chuzzlewit and old Chuffey, the balefulness of Jonas, the fatality of Nadgett, the cynical villainy of Tigg and the patient waiting for vengeance of old Martin. (Whenever there is any desperate dealing afoot, one feels Dickens on tip-toe. He is almost too eager.) From the moment when Jonas, after his interception on the ship, comes to a decision, there is no mistake about the nature of that decision. His eager questioning of Dr. Jobling as to the position of the jugular vein, his ghastly merriment, his behaviour in the coach with Tigg,

and his demeanour on disturbing the pleasant tea-party give him desperately away. Even that is not enough. Tom Pinch, on that last occasion, had intended to mention the sleuth Nadgett's name, but Jonas' violence had prevented him. Dickens, agog with excitement, rubs in this disappearance of the villain's last chance.

“If the name could have passed his lips; if Jonas, in the insolence of his vile nature, had never roused him to do that old act of manliness, for which (and not for his last offence) he hated him with such malignity; if Jonas could have learned, as he then could and would have learned, through Tom's means, what unsuspected spy there was upon him; he would have been saved from the commission of a Guilty Deed, then drawing on towards its black accomplishment.”

How capital are those capital letters, and with what a rapture of gruesomeness—not brutality—is that Guilty Deed described and its consequences visited upon the loathsome doer! Dickens loved his tragic as dearly as his comic episodes, and the creative energy that flowed into Sairey Gamp was the same that animated Jonas Chuzzlewit and Quilp.

(Nevertheless, though Dickens' enthusiastic enjoyment of every character and situation is captivating in its torrential energy, he reaches his supreme heights when humour is added to love.) Forster, in his *Life of Dickens*, justly complains of those critics who picked holes in his work without any appreciation of his humour, as if Dickens, after Shakespeare, were not our greatest comic poet. (Tragedy was not in his line, if only because in tragedy the element of proportion is vital. Dickens' very exuberance forbade proportion, while it gave a vigour, a broadness and a variety to his comedy which has made it, in spite of all fastidious objections, the delight of every normal reader.) It hardly needs saying that Shakespeare's broad comedy is superior to that of Dickens, for Shakespeare had an unparalleled profundity. What he added to an intense creative force was a spiritual understanding of human life and human nature to which few men have ever attained. The hand which fashioned Hamlet and Cleopatra also fashioned Falstaff and Malvolio: of that we need no proof. Even at his merriest, Shakespeare went below the surface. Falstaff, Malvolio, even Sir Toby Belch are more than comic types; they are men like ourselves who suffer

and enjoy, with an ache lurking behind their laughter and a painful sense, even at the height of their antics, of the outrage which they are putting upon the dignity of their own natures. It is enough to compare the overthrow of Falstaff with that of Mr. Pecksniff. We pity Falstaff but we only smile at prostrate Pecksniff. Yet, if Dickens' comedy, compared with Shakespeare's, is superficial, that does not convict it of falsity. There is a great deal of truth upon the surface, whether of men or of things; and Dickens seized that truth with a rapturous acuteness which no other English novelist, unless it be Fielding, has ever displayed.

Pecksniff and his daughters, Sairey Gamp, Mrs. Todgers, Dr. Jobling, Tigg and Chevy Slyme are not untrue; they are only incomplete from the point of view of perfect knowledge. There is no reason why comic narrative should be informed by an all-embracing knowledge, since the greater part of observable life takes place on the surface. It is a common regret of men and women that they are judged by their surfaces; but how else should they be judged when their depths break through so seldom? All we can object to in Pecksniff and Sairey Gamp is that their third dimension is

wanting, and we cannot even infer it except, possibly, in Pecksniff's case, when he is loathsome-ly wooing Mary Graham or falling, like a greedy gull, into the trap laid for him by Tigg. One is bound, on cool reflection, to admit this deficiency, but in the heat of reading how little it is apparent! Dickens makes up for it magnificently by his masterly grip upon the two dimensions, and by the variety, the vivacity and the conviction with which he displays them. *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a great novel, and it is the comic scenes and characters that make it so. From the moment when Pecksniff is seen recovering, with pickled brown paper and brandy, in the back parlour we are under the spell of Dickens' irresistible power of comic delineation and inexhaustible invention of comic dialogue. And if his greatest scenes are episodic, like the dinner at Todgers's and Mrs. Gamp's visit to the Moulds, there is no fault in that. One must stand still to laugh; and having laughed prodigiously with Dickens the mind is so lightened that, like an airy body, it is carried rapidly onward by the rush of his subsequent narration.

Upon Mrs. Gamp and Pecksniff their creator visits a certain amount of moral indignation. His was not the indignation of a philosopher or

a puritan, but the blaze of a very generous heart which had known much misery, against the people and abuses which cause most of the misery suffered by common humanity, particularly by the humanity of large towns. Dickens' indignation varies considerably in emphasis throughout his work, and it is observable that it is least effective where it is least disguised. When he exhibits the naked flames, instead of using their heat to fire the crucible of his art, the appearance is not particularly impressive. Thus, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the indignation is really fiercest just where the art is coldest, namely, in some of the incidental American scenes, where he uncontrollably bursts out into immoderate diatribes which justly earned American resentment. His bare opinion was not deeply enough founded to be truly valuable, when dogmatically expressed. The portraits of Colonel Diver, Scadder and Hannibal Chollop would have been more than sufficient, and there the artist was allowing his emotion to fulfil its proper function of fusing into a particular form the elements of his observation. Again, the moral theme in general of this novel is the evil of selfishness, and yet the lesson of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is the thing to which

its readers pay a very perfunctory attention. The reform of thoughtless and self-centred young Martin, the wooden attitude of Mark Tapley with his recurrent tag about "coming out strong," and the rhetorical speeches of old Martin concerning the curse of riches do not either pierce our hearts or satisfy our judgments: we take them as so much machinery, enjoying the individuals in action, but bidding them go hang as moral instances. As for Jonas Chuzzlewit, we thrill to him as a monstrous villain, but it really matters very little whether or no old Anthony's system of education would normally produce such a villain. After all, Anthony is a monstrosity.

(The truth is that Dickens' moral indignation, for all its natural heat, only approaches sublimity of expression when it is almost indistinguishable from love.) He loved young Martin a little, Mark Tapley a little more, and Jonas Chuzzlewit a great deal; but these affections were nothing beside his emotions towards Sairey Gamp and Pecksniff. Sairey Gamp, as the type of incompetent, drunken sick nurse, might have been treated like Scadder; with a few masterly touches of description and dialogue she would have been as vivid a figure, and no more. That would

have been sufficient for Dickens' indignation. But he fell in love with her, of course he did—with her umbrella, her rusty gown, her masterful treatment of unruly patients, her well-mapped alcoholic regimen and, above all, the allusive, meandering, Gampian eloquence that has become immortal. How could he have imagined her making herself comfortable in the sick Lewsome's bedroom, unless he had loved her so much that he became merged in her? Is it not Dickens himself, in the person of Mrs. Gamp, who gives the order for supper?

“ ‘ I think, young woman,’ said Mrs. Gamp to the assistant chambermaid, in a tone expressive of weakness, ‘ that I could pick a little bit of pickled salmon, with a nice little sprig of fennel, and a sprinkling of white pepper. I takes new bread, my dear, with just a little pat of fresh butter, and a mossel of cheese. In case there should be such a thing as a cucumber in the ’ouse, will you be so kind as bring it, for I’m rather partial to ’em, and they does a world of good in a sick room. If they draws the Brighton Old Tipper here, I takes *that* ale at night, my love; it bein’ considered wakeful by the doctors. And whatever you do, young woman, don’t bring more than a

shilling's-worth of gin and water warm when I rings the bell a second time.' "

The "Brighton Old Tipper" alone gives the man away. In this early speech, however, Dickens had not entirely warmed to Mrs. Gamp's eloquence; but his warmth grew apace, and by the time that Sairey was presiding at poor Mercy's tea-table, "resting her saucer on the palm of her outspread hand," he had completely incorporated her. In that scene and at every subsequent appearance her speeches are classic, and go on from strength to strength. It might have been thought that her quarrel with Betsey Prig would have been her climax, and that no invention about the Harris family could have eclipsed the reminiscence of Mrs. Harris' First,

"which Mr. Harris who was dreadful timid went and stopped his ears in an empty dog-kennel, and never took his hands away or came out once till he was showed the baby, wen bein' took with fits, the doctor collared him and laid him on his back upon the airy stones, and she was told to ease her mind, his owls was organs."

But it was not so. Even in the midst of old

Martin's tremendous dealing out of justice, when Pecksniff himself loses artistic solidity, Sairey Gamp rises to a still more gigantic stature of inconsequence with her last oration about her business,

“ ‘ which, Mr. Chuzzlewit,’ she said, ‘ is well bekown to Mrs. Harris as has one sweet infant (though she *do* not wish it known) in her own family by the mother’s side, kep in spirits in a bottle; and that sweet babe she see at Greenwich Fair, a-travelling in company with the pink-eyed lady, Prooshan dwarf, and livin’ skelinton, which judge her feelins when the barrel organ played, and she was showed her own dear sister’s child, the same not bein’ expected from the outside picter, where it was painted quite contrairy in a livin’ state, a many sizes larger, and performing beautiful upon the Arp, which never did that dear child know or do: since breathe it never did to speak on, in this wale! ’ ”

And when, after the curt words of old Martin, she “ fell into one of the walking swoons ” and departed on the arm of Poll Sweedlepipe, we feel that the brightest light in the book has gone out. For we, too, love

Mrs. Gamp, and all the moral indignation left is a very subtle refinement of that emotion.

Similar considerations apply to Pecksniff, whose very name is a masterpiece. We may well loathe him and blush for him as a portrait of that vice of hypocrisy with which, not altogether unjustly, foreign observers tax us. But what indignation can stand out against the picture of Mr. Pecksniff benignantly swaying against the banisters and asking to be favoured with Mrs. Todgers's idea of a wooden leg? Pecksniff, like Bottom, is translated: Dickens' love, overpowering primary indignation, snatches him up and places him in a legendary world, which has no less reality than the world of fact, though it is a different reality. His hypocrisy takes on a heroic stature, in the light of Dickens' comedy: it becomes an idealised master pattern to which mere sublunary Pecksniffism can only approximate. To compare him with individuals and call him a caricature is to miss the truth of Pecksniff altogether. He is a comic sublimation, like the Socrates of Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Mere caricatures do not live, since their momentary life is bound up with that of their transitory subjects; but Pecksniff lives for ever, in the full bloom of his oily cheerfulness, in the company

of Cherry and Merry, the pride of Tom Pinch and of a Wiltshire village. We almost regret his exposure and we forget that figure of a "drunken, squalid, begging-letter-writing man" who, in the epilogue, is said to live on Tom Pinch's magnanimity. Against so unctuous a spirit revengefulness is unavailing: Dickens, who called him up and adored him, was powerless to destroy him. The bare mention of *Martin Chuzzlewit* conjures him before us at once in all the perfection of cunning imposture, half persuaded of virtue by the vehemence of his own professions.

" 'When I have wound myself up, if I may employ such a term,' said Mr. Pecksniff with exquisite tenderness, 'and know that I am Going, I feel that in the lesson afforded by the works within me, I am a Benefactor to my Kind.' "

That is the Pecksniff who defies death—a figure whom only Dickens, the creator of so many immortals, could have fashioned. And his type exists to-day, though in altered circumstances: we may find him on the staff of nearly every newspaper.

III

PENDENNIS

Pendennis is Thackeray's *Tom Jones*, his *Illusions Perdues*, his *Education Sentimentale*: it belongs to the great branch of biographical novels, of which Marcel Proust's *A la recherche des temps perdus* is one of the latest and most important descendants. The cadets of this family, especially in English literature, are as numerous as the waves of the sea, but they have neither the stature nor the longevity of the great branch. How many novels have we not read in the last thirty years that carried a hero through school and university, through his first love and his first adventures in London up to the time when he is forty, married and no longer heroic? And how many of these still keep the vitality of *Pendennis*? Though all the characters, conditions, customs and public opinions of which that novel was true have passed away, it stubbornly lives on as a work to be reckoned with, apart from any enjoy-

ment which may, or may not, be derived from reading it. This persistence of *Pendennis* is something of a mystery. Many completer works of art have already wilted, and hundreds more admirable heroes than Arthur Pendennis are now forgotten. Moreover, its vitality is not Thackeray's vitality in the sense that the vitality of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is abundantly Dickens' — an irresistible personal emanation as heady as strong wine: in *Pendennis*, at all events, Thackeray the man is rather a pale and peevish ghost, whose tendency to irritating soliloquy will cure most readers of any wish to revive him. Yet your *Clayhangers* and *Tono-Bungays* and *Sinister Streets*, though more modern, more pointed and possibly more amusing, turn a little sickly, like the gods in Walhall without Freia's apples, when brought alongside of this long, rambling and episodic tale.

Professor Saintsbury, one of the warmest living admirers of Thackeray, asserts that "one finds a curious unanimity among qualified and well-affected judges that *Pendennis* is, perhaps, the most *delightful* of Thackeray's novels," and he proceeds, in his introduction to the Oxford edition, to expatiate on the various delights. It is very well, but I believe *Pendennis* to have

securer buttresses than these unanimities and delights. The spirit of delight is a wayward and inattentive creature, who does not always come when you ring the bell: she waits sedulously upon one generation and entirely refuses to attend the next. She offers different goods to different customers sitting at the same moment at the same table; for what is she, after all, but a phantom of the individual temperament? But *Pendennis*, surely, is upheld by admiration, even where sheer delight is restrained; and the qualities commanding this more sober emotion explain, perhaps, more cogently the massive durability of the structure.

No quality in *Pendennis* is more remarkable than Thackeray's fidelity to experience. Virginia Woolf, I think, refers fleetingly somewhere in *The Common Reader* to his "patient realism." The accuracy of perception which is that witty lady's gift is reflected in this apparently random phrase; and the emphasis is to be laid, not upon the realism, but upon the patience. The almost universal fault of modern biographical novels is impatience, an infection from which no work of art ever recovers. Rapidity of execution is not necessarily a sign of impatience: the fatal impru-

dence is premature birth-giving, that snatching of representations from the womb of thought before they are ripe. All young artists are subject to this impulse: it is irresistible. But they cannot override the laws of nature; and, if they will choose for their seven-months children types of art that only completest gestation can properly shape, they must pay the penalty. An impatiently written biographical novel always betrays itself by an element of caricature. The poor thing is not solid, so it must be tricked out to appear bright, quaint, original, what you will. It earns its applause and trips off to an early grave. We need not repine. No physical suffering is involved, and the authors of these creatures are often most comfortably rewarded; but the reward, like the creature, is perishable. The patient artist, who conceives from a ripe mind, does not bring to birth these weaklings, nor conceal weaknesses by accentuating deformities. He knows that, in the long run, nothing is so dull, so commonplace, so unoriginal as the unusual and the *piquant*. To few writers is it given, as it was given to Dickens, to be a creator of gigantic, supra-mundane absurdities: there is a force within such genius which dispenses with patience. But for the others, even

for the greatest, patience is the golden virtue. Novelists have never practised this virtue in vain, for by it they have discovered that the great secrets and mysteries, the compelling tragedies and the abiding comedies, of human life lie beneath the outwardly uniform and commonplace, in the average experience and in the passions and reactions which all men share. Youth cannot realise this truth, and middle age too often chooses to forget it. Whole generations seem sometimes to ignore or to be afraid of it: possibly our own is one of them. If so, we condemn ourselves to inferiority in comparison with Thackeray's age. For patience in art shows courage and great inward strength, and Thackeray's age had these. Thackeray, perhaps, had more courage than strength, but even *his* strength is not to be despised by us. Few imaginative writers of our day have the strength to be so faithful and so resolutely to resist the temptation, for which there is no better word than "faking" experience.

Pendennis is a very long novel containing a great variety of lively scenes and characters, full of action, as abundant in humour as in sentiment, reflecting an exceedingly wide and

assiduous observation, and exploiting many emotions; yet in all its length and variety it contains no caricature. Indeed, Thackeray was wanting in that cocksureness which makes the good caricaturist; yet many a novelist as sceptical as he would not have avoided that almost involuntary surrender to occasional weakness or weariness which results in a comic or satirical foreshortening of experience. Thackeray, as athletes say, had an exceptional "wind," which carried him through to the finish without any tricks or makeshifts. It has been said that Captain Costigan is a caricature, but this judgment, I believe, rests upon one or two aspects of him that are not material. Possibly—though in the absence of direct historical evidence it would be unwise to say certainly—so low a character could never have been an officer in an Irish regiment, even in time of war. Yet it is to be remarked that the evidence of Costigan's service in the "Fighting Hundred and Third" is no more than his own unreliable conversation, and that his creator makes no effort to substantiate it; so we may dismiss it, if we please, with the visionary glories of the Captain's noble birth and ancestral estate. Purists, again, may reason-

ably take objection to the comic spelling in which his words are rendered, as being in the bad old tradition of farce. But, in truth, it is almost impossible to render in written words the unmistakable reality of a strong Irish brogue, and the fact that Thackeray followed, in this respect, a convention does not convict him of caricature. These externals apart, surely Costigan rings true enough as one of those dissipated derelicts who are to be found on the outskirts of the stage, a drunkard, a sponger and a boaster, with impossible manners and a few domestic virtues. Thackeray does not strain his part in the story, which is a comparatively small one: he uses him where necessary and then dismisses him without ceremony. Even on his first appearance, when for a moment he takes the centre of the stage as Arthur's chosen father-in-law, Thackeray never exceeds artistic restraint in his comedy. If you take the interview between Costigan and Major Pendennis, when the latter undeceives the Irishman with regard to Arthur's prospects—an episode where both characters, gradually roused to anger, are thrown into high relief—you will not find one illegitimate phrase or forced remark. The situation is what makes the comedy, not the idiosyncrasies of the

characters. It is a true test, out of which Thackeray invariably comes with his artistic honour untouched. He was too sure of his effects to spoil them by over-emphasis.

It is not, however, by the character of Costigan that Thackeray's patient fidelity stands or falls; for it is strikingly exemplified in *Pendennis*, not only by the spacious rhythms of the narrative, but in such characters as Helen and Arthur Pendennis, the Major, Laura and Blanche, Harry Foker, Bows, the Fotheringay and even Sir Francis Clavering. If Thackeray did not stand in English literature so eminently as he does, and if *Pendennis* were not so familiar, insistence upon this point might be misunderstood as presenting this great, polished and humorous writer in the guise of a mere painstaking plodder. But let us give praise that the brilliance, eloquence and movement of Thackeray's work are so generally acknowledged that no misconception can arise from pointing out how, with these gifts at his command, he controlled and enhanced them by the virtue of patience. He was not afraid of being dull—a sure sign in an author that he is master of his mind and of his material. Consider Arthur Pendennis, for example. Nobody can claim that he is either

an admirable or a lovable person: he is irritating and tiresome very often, without any marked compensating virtue such as reconciles us to generous Tom Jones. He is not even—whatever Thackeray may have intended—a good type of the average sensual Englishman, who, apart from certain of Harry Foker's extravagances, is much more like that amiable gentleman. Pen is a bit too clever, and a bit too introspective, too like his creator, in fine. Yet with all these disadvantages Arthur Pendennis succeeds by the sheer strength, truth and amplitude of his delineation. Above the innumerable dead protagonists of biographical novels he stands beside Tom Jones in the same order of immortality. Martin Chuzzlewit was another such vain and selfish young fellow, but how ridiculous and mechanical he appears, with his sudden conversion by Tapley and the swamps, beside Arthur Pendennis! The comparison, though it would be foolish to press it, is a just one in essentials: both were spoilt boys redeemed, or at least instructed, by experience. And what Thackeray makes clear in Arthur is that a convincing effect of this kind can only be obtained by the patient working out of unhurried detail and the delicate marking of gradual change. It is true that

after the spirited opening with the Fotheringay affair and the masterly rapidity with which Arthur's Oxford career is surveyed we sometimes groan under his dialogues with Warrington in the Temple, we hum and haw over so much Fanny and, towards the end, heartily curse Sadduceism and Thackeray's concern about it; yet we have to confess that Arthur's flesh never changes into wood, that it is like our own flesh, and that he passes out of the last chapter into the interesting limbo of "ever afterwards," as human, as wayward and as incalculable as any of ourselves, still but half-taught, half-resigned, irrationally hopeful and unreasonably despondent.

"His children or their mother have never heard a harsh word from him; and when his fits of moodiness and solitude are over, welcome him back with never-failing regard and confidence."

It has taken forty years and nearly a thousand pages to give an individual point to that remark; and it will hardly ever take less, whether in real life or fiction.

That Major Pendennis is a remarkable creation needs no saying: we enjoy him and believe in him from the first moment when we

find him opening his letters at breakfast in his club, and our belief is only a trifle shaken when, in the interests of the not very telling intrigue surrounding Altamont-Amory, he is shown pleading on his knees to Pen against the latter's rejection of a dishonourable bargain. He is one of those characters who continue to exist outside the book in which they were born. Though comic he is never ridiculous, and though pitiable in his decline he is never contemptible: indeed his manly defeat of the cowardly Morgan—one of the most excellent chapters in the whole book—admirably emphasises the solidity of the man under all the painful refinements of his toilet and the prejudices of his caste. Unlike his nephew, he comes on to the stage a formed character, absolutely unchangeable, and in this respect he superficially resembles many a character of Dickens. But in reality there is nothing Dickensian about him. He is not the magnification of a fantasy, not the embodiment of an idiosyncrasy enlarged by comic genius to superhuman proportions, but the embodiment, rather, of a very rigid attitude of mind, which Thackeray more than once calls worldliness. Professor Saintsbury says of the Major that "the club element has churned and foamed

itself into an elderly but wonderfully attractive Venus of the other sex"; but I confess to finding the Major's chief attraction elsewhere than in his carefully preserved personal appearance and popularity. All the details of his toilet, his bachelor habits, his social strategy, his foibles and his snobbishness are exceedingly lively and amusing, but what gives him his stature is the extraordinary exactitude of his presentation as the expression of a fixed attitude—the attitude of worldly self-interest. Here again the triumph is of Thackeray's patience and artistic resourcefulness. The Major never intrudes, yet things are so contrived that he is always there to give his reflection upon every turn of the action. And he never fails us, whether he is manœuvring the love-sick Pen out of his entanglement, adroitly managing Mrs. Pendennis while sparing her feelings, paying court to the Begum or pressing his worldly wisdom upon his nephew. His worldly wisdom is dismal enough—though more dismal to read than to practise—but it is so admirably phrased by Thackeray that it never becomes stale or mechanical, just as the Major himself, whom the least hasty push on Thackeray's part would have made a figure of fun, never loses his dignity. No chapter more admirably

shows how Thackeray kept his measure with this character than that where the Major, espying Arthur from Bays's club window, summons him and takes his arm to call upon Lady Clavering, getting "bows from a duke at a crossing, a bishop (on a cob), and a Cabinet Minister with an umbrella," and expounding, as he progresses, the poor swell's vade-mecum to a comfortable existence. It would have been so easy to overdo the satire and to shatter the Major with contempt; but not so Thackeray, who waits and smiles and registers. The Major's venerating embrace of the great duke's gloved finger, his unconscious imitation of the duke's curt sentences, his expansive assertion that a magnate with ten thousand acres of the best land in Cheshire may do as he likes, and his patronising pride in Arthur's literary success, with a side glance at "poor Byron who ruined himself, and contracted the worst habits by living with poets and newspaper writers," are all so delicately touched in that the old man's shallowness and vanity are exposed with all their bloom upon them. His last speech in that chapter is typical of Thackeray's art.

"Lady Clavering is going out for her

drive,' the major said. 'We shall only have to leave our pasteboards, Arthur.' He used the word 'pasteboards,' having heard it from some of the ingenuous youth of the nobility about town, and as a modern phrase suited to Pen's tender years."

Only Thackeray would have observed so small a matter and have used it as an almost unnoticeable stroke precisely where it was most telling. A similar skill, a skill of infinitely patient accumulation used with absolute relevance, can be traced in the presentation of the silly curate Smirke, Bows the embittered musician, Samuel Huxter the vulgar but good-hearted young medical student, and, above all, in Harry Foker. Harry Foker might have been just a jolly joke, a kind of superior Bob Allen, with his horsiness, his "stunning" clothes and his imperturbable good-fellowship; but he turns out, under Thackeray's unerring draughtsmanhip, a most genuine and lovable fellow, if a fool. His dialogue with Pen, after the ball at Gaunt House, when Pen has airily confessed his intention to marry Blanche for her money, is a masterpiece. The gilded youth, with his brewery-won wealth and his gallery of girls

in tights, bursts out into a horrified cry of anguish at hearing this proposed desecration of the shrine where he hopelessly but genuinely adored. Only an author who possessed every atom of his creation could have written those two tragic speeches of the "pretty downy" Foker which sadly cheapen the gentlemanliness of gentlemanly Pen. They are credible, they are dramatic and at one stroke give Harry Foker another dimension. They equal any speech indited by the "naturally good heart" of Tom Jones, and they are infinitely more touching because of their fumbling diction. "But what's the use of talking? I'm booked for another race. It's that kills me, Pen." All Tom Jones's copious appeals to the better nature of his friend Nightingale do not rise to the emotional height of these three sentences, which betray poor Foker's agony at the thought of Blanche sacrificed to just such a worldly engagement as he himself was bound by; and none of Thackeray's heart-throbs over Pen's dalliance with pretty Fanny do him half so much credit as these which he placed behind flashy Mr. Foker's waistcoat.

Any excursus on Thackeray's women would need a wider sweep than the confines of

Pendennis, within which I shall remain; and the noble lady of *Esmond*, Becky Sharp and the simple Amelia could hardly be excluded from such a discussion. Thackeray was not very curious of variety in women, and, though he studied his chief female characters with the same patient fidelity as his male, his women tend to sort themselves into the noble and affectionate, the affected and worldly, and the stagy and more or less improper. Blanche Amory, the puss of *Pendennis*, is a delightful figure of comedy, with her arch wiles, her snatches of French and her *émotions*, but beside Becky Sharp she appears rather frivolous: one might damage the wings of that butterfly in trying to examine them too closely. The Fotheringay, of course, is a wonderful study of that type of executive artist which, in the form of a woman, is distractingly beautiful, immensely energetic and absolutely insensible. She is like some adorable steam-roller, inexhaustibly supplied with the fuel of health, good spirits and humourless common-sense, which functions amazingly when directed by the brains of some invisible driver, as the Fotheringay by poor little Bows; and when there is nobody at the wheel she goes on blandly and 'blindly flattening people out.

Her conversation during the Chatteris episode, especially in her philosophic pacification of the outraged Costigan, is quite classic; and when that episode is over, Thackeray, with his usual tact, relegates her to the position of a "walker-on." As for Fanny, her creator really exhausts all there is to be said of her, the sentimental (if only potential) *grisette*. Many people think that he said too much, and perhaps they are not far wrong.

There only remain, in the first rank, Helen Pendennis and Laura, who form a kind of indivisible entity, or Siamese twins, of the angelic persuasion, crushingly affectionate, benignly jealous, irritatingly long-suffering and extremely ignorant. Laura only exists to supply the necessary punitive aspect, when Pen needs castigation, to this otherwise invariably tender and sensitive maternal countenance, and, after Helen's death has severed the connection, to supply Arthur's children, eventually, with a similar guardian. Few people, at all events of a more modern generation, can have read *Pendennis* without some internal exclamations of annoyance at Thackeray's attitude to Pen's adoring but unwise mother. She was obviously just as trying in her way as old Lisbeth Bede. George

Eliot, being a woman, would have made no bones about saying so; and the effect would have been a great deal better, for, in truth, the reader feels a far deeper sympathy for Adam's mother than for Pen's. Yet we must not be unjust to Thackeray, who was a man, not a demi-god, and had certain tender spots in his heart, the touching of which did not neutralise his skill or unnerve his art, but induced him to couple the normal diapason with a tremolo stop of the *vox humana* type. Helen Pendennis draws out that stop every time, and we should appreciate her more if Thackeray had restrained his tendency to lachrymose heavenward glances on her behalf. Indeed, the discerning reader can hardly help perceiving, in spite of his discomfort at Thackeray's sentimental apostrophes, that Helen Pendennis is one of the truest characters that he ever depicted. The modern age of motor-cars, telegrams and telephones has speeded up mothers considerably, making them less innocent and perhaps less long-suffering; but, given Mrs. Pendennis' date, her history, her widowhood, her country seclusion and her only son, who can deny that in her every motion and thought, in her susceptibility, her partisanship, her self-sacrifice, her injustice

and her want of worldly wisdom she is absolutely true and living? The world has not so far advanced that memories of many such grandmothers are extinct. If Thackeray never gave us a scene like that of Lisbeth fretting Adam Bede, and if he tearfully condoned Helen's foibles, at least he never falsified them. As he reveals her nearly irretrievable weakness over the Fotheringay, so he exhibits her awful descent upon Pen's sick-bed, her cruelty to Fanny and her dumb resentment that Pen should have a secret in his heart hidden from her. His tenderness was excessive, but not misplaced, for he knew where and how deep the thorns enter a mother's heart where an only son is concerned. When, at the height of Pen's first passion, she finds him writing in his bed and takes the boy in her arms, soothing and comforting him, we are not ashamed to be moved; and we do not read without compunction, if we are men, the description of her troubled days at the German spa when

“poor Pen was most constant and affectionate in waiting upon his mother whose wounded bosom yearned with love towards him, though there was a secret between them, and an anguish or rage almost on the mother's part,

to think that she was dispossessed somehow of her son's heart, or that there were recesses in it which she must not or dared not enter. She sickened as she thought of the sacred days of boyhood when it had not been so—when her Arthur's heart had no secrets, and she was his all in all: when he poured his hopes and pleasures, his childish griefs, vanities, triumphs into her willing and tender embrace; when her home was his nest still; and before fate, selfishness, nature, had driven him forth on wayward wings—to range on his own flight—to sing his own song—and to seek his own home and his own mate.”

Thackeray's patient realism, however, has another side to it. If it accounts for the finish and perfection of his character-drawing, it has a depressing effect, in *Pendennis* at least, upon his more descriptive passages. This is particularly evident in the chapters which give an extensive view of a young man's life in London—Pen in chambers with Warrington, the harmony in the Back Kitchen, Captain Shandon and the *coulisses* of journalism, and the manœuvres and hangers-on of Bacon and Bungay. These chapters are not in the least dull; indeed, besides accuracy, they have

humour and vivacity enough; but if you put them beside similar chapters of Dickens they seem to be strangely dead. Dickens' extraordinary rapture, no doubt, translated everything he saw and enjoyed even what would normally be unenjoyable, but when Thackeray writes of what he himself had observed as if he were carefully reintegrating the life of some young spark in unburied Pompeii, one would sacrifice a good deal of accuracy for an ounce of Dickens' gusto. On comparing Thackeray's general description of the Temple in Chapter XXIX with the cognate passage in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or with Lamb's essay on the old benchers of the Inner Temple, the difference of tone is immediately apparent. The Temple and its inhabitants brim with life in Lamb and Dickens, but in *Pendennis* it has the atmosphere of a graveyard in which Pen and Warrington have unaccountably chosen to defy the ghosts of the Grumps and Paleys whom Thackeray so mournfully depicts. Or take the introduction to Shepherd's Inn:

"somewhere behind the black gables and smutty chimney-stacks of Wych Street, Holywell Street, Chancery Lane, the quadrangle lies, hidden from the outer world; and it is

approached by curious passages and ambiguous smoky alleys, on which the sun has forgotten to shine. Slop-sellers, brandy-ball and hard-bake vendors, purveyors of theatrical prints for youth, dealers in dingy furniture, and bedding suggestive of anything but sleep, line the narrow walls and dark casements with their wares. The doors are many-belled: and crowds of dirty children form endless groups about the steps: or around the shellfish-dealers' trays in these courts; whereof the damp pavements resound with pattens, and are drabbed with a never-failing mud. Ballad-singers come and chant here, in deadly guttural tones, satirical songs against the Whig Administration, against the bishops and dignified clergy, against the German relatives of an august royal family: Punch sets up his theatre, sure of an audience, and occasionally of a halfpenny from the swarming occupants of the houses: women scream after their children for loitering in the gutter, or, worse still, against the husband who comes reeling from the gin-shop;—there is a ceaseless din and life in these courts, out of which you pass into the tranquil, old-fashioned quadrangle of Shepherd's Inn. In a mangy little grass-plat in the centre rises up the statue of Shepherd,

defended by iron railings from the assaults of boys. . . .”

How admirable it is, how classic and how cold! In transcribing the passage I have relished again the deft choice of epithets and the perfect phrasing of the sentences. But something is wanting, nevertheless, and that something is what you find, superabundantly perhaps, in Dickens when he is revelling in the glorious grime round Todgers's, and in William de Morgan when he is lingering in Tallack Street. Nor is it only wanting in his geographical passages, but nearly always when, in *Pendennis*, he is surveying a general scene of common life. One may except, perhaps, the ball at Baymouth—though it is not to be compared with the ball in *Emma*—and certainly the rattling account of the bustle attending the Claverings' arrival at Clavering Park; but one is nearly always conscious of it in the middle and later stages of the book, most especially at the famous dinner given by Bungay in the Row, where Thackeray shows himself a very finished “quizz,” to use a phrase of his day, but fails to make the function go, because he gives the impression of a satirical showman exhibiting a collection of

curious aborigines in a pen, with a special knowledge due to having lived among them and the ample suggestion that he now moves in more civilised circles. With how different a spirit does Balzac, who had as clear an eye and as wide an experience if less patience, set to work when he takes us behind the scenes of journalism in *Illusions Perdues*! The rapidity of Lucien's success and disaster may be unreal there, in the sense that an accelerated film is unreal, but the unreal *tempo* does not seriously falsify the picture. Compare Balzac's marvellous description of the seething life of the Palais Royal, of Lousteau and Blondet, of D'Arthez and Chrestien, of Lucien's first dramatic article and of the supper at Florine's, with Thackeray's office of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Shandon and his prospectus, Bacon's negotiations, Bungay's dinner, Popjoy, Wagg and the rest—and it is difficult not to feel that the Englishman was holding his pen with cold fingers.

Pendennis shows, more than any other of his great books, the strange absence of some warming principle in Thackeray which has done a disproportionate injury to his popularity and obscured the true greatness of his art, in England certainly and still more abroad.

There are some admirers who, like Professor Saintsbury, perhaps compensate this deficiency by unconsciously transferring some of their own abundant warmth to the reading of Thackeray; there are others to whose cast of mind Thackeray's coolness is congenial; but there are many more, I fear, who have been rendered antagonistic even to his manifest triumphs by their instinctive recognition of his constitutional deficiency. He fell seriously ill, it is true, while writing *Pendennis*, but that does not explain all. To say, as was commonly said in his lifetime, that he was a cynic explains nothing, because it is not true. Nobody who believed so utterly in the possibility of human virtue and charity and unselfishness, howsoever rare, could be called a cynic. It was something more mysterious than cynicism which made him, for instance, suddenly hold up Smirke's hidden love for Mrs. Pendennis as a type of all human cares.

“ Mr. Smirke has a private care watching at his bedside, and sitting behind him on his pony; and is no more satisfied than the rest of us. How lonely we are in the world! how selfish and secret, everybody! You and your wife have pressed the same pillow for forty

years and fancy yourselves united.—Psha, does she cry out when you have the gout, or do you lie awake when she has the toothache? Your artless daughter, seemingly all innocence and devoted to her mamma and her piano-lesson, is thinking of neither, but of the young lieutenant with whom she danced at the last ball—the honest frank boy just returned from school is secretly speculating upon the money you will give him, and the debts he owes the tart-man. The old grandmother crooning in the corner, and bound to another world within a few months, has some business or cares which are quite private and her own . . . and, as for your wife—O philosophic reader, answer and say—Do you tell *her* all? Ah, sir—a distinct universe walks about under your hat and under mine—all things in nature are different to each—the woman we look at has not the same features, the dish we eat from has not the same taste to the one and the other—you and I are but a pair of infinite isolations, with some fellow-islands a little more or less near to us.”

It was something more mysterious which made him appear so determined to show up, in spite of his unconcealed pride that he had

all this sufficient inside knowledge from long familiarity, the seamy side of nearly everything that has a brilliant appearance—dukes and country gentlemen, Society ladies, popular bachelors, divine actresses, the innocence of youth, filial devotion, a university career, success at the Bar, the editing of newspapers, the publishing of books, the pleasure of writing, the sweetness of idling, the exhilaration of work—as if his features worked into a grimace whenever he considered any position, object or activity which anyone could have loved or anyone desired. For, through all these methodical exposures, brilliantly executed as they are, one sees, not a cynic washing his hands of the world, but a disappointed idealist disconsolately wringing them.

Mr. G. K. Chesterton, in his book on Dickens, speaks in passing of Thackeray's "reverent scepticism." This phrase, perhaps, is apt and compendious, but it goes really very little way towards explaining the chill somewhere in Thackeray's marrow which, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes obviously, sicklies over the robustness of his work. We know of his great domestic tragedy but we shall never know enough of Thackeray's inner life to lay our finger surely upon the cause

and the place of the flaw. Its hidden presence is revealed in *Pendennis*, not only by the exposures of seamy sides, but in the characteristic soliloquies of the author, which often burst upon the reader unawares, like squalls out of clear sky—the groans of a heart that can no longer stifle its oppression.

“ It was the first step in life that Pen was making—Ah! what a dangerous journey it is, and how the bravest may stumble and the strongest fail. Brother wayfarer! may you have a kind arm to support yours on the path, and a friendly hand to succour those who fall beside you. May truth guide, mercy forgive at the end, and love accompany always. Without that lamp how blind the traveller would be, and how black and cheerless the journey↓”

These ominous words introduce Arthur to Oxford. We have another “alas!” at the beginning of the next chapter over the selfishness and impurity of men, and later on in the same come two pages of melancholy reflection on the havoc that time plays with the friends of our youth.

“ Fate has interposed darkly, and the young

voices are silent, and the eager brains have ceased to work. This one had genius and a great descent, and seemed to be destined for honours which are now of little worth to him: that had virtue, learning, genius—every faculty and endowment which might secure love, admiration, and worldly fame: an obscure and solitary churchyard contains the grave of many fond hopes, and the pathetic stone which bids them farewell—I saw the sun shining on it in the fall of last year, and heard the sweet village choir raising anthems round about. What boots whether it be Westminster or a little country spire which covers your ashes, or if, a few days sooner or later, the world forgets you?”

Other dirges follow, not only over the hollowness of success, but over the tendency of love and truth to grow dim in human life, over the awe which must possess a man who looks back on childhood and reflects that he is the same, over the vanity of riches which an heir is waiting to inherit; and all are crowned by the tremendous dialogue in Chapter LXI, where Pen develops the creed of a sceptic to Warrington, and Thackeray's remorseful indictment of Sadduceeism which follows it. Thackeray speaks:

“To what, we say, does this scepticism lead? It leads a man to shameful loneliness and selfishness, so to speak—the more shameful, because it is so good-humoured and conscienceless and serene. Conscience! What is conscience? Why accept remorse? What is public or private faith? Mythuses alike enveloped in enormous tradition. If seeing and acknowledging the lies of the world, Arthur, as see them you can with only too fatal a clearness, you submit to them without any protest further than a laugh: if, plunged yourself in easy sensuality, you allow the whole wretched world to pass groaning by you unmoved: if the fight for the truth is taking place, and all men of honour are on the ground armed on one side or the other, and you alone are to lie on your balcony and smoke your pipe out of the noise and the danger, you had better have died, or never been at all, than such a sensual coward.”

It is Thackeray's stricken soul arguing with itself, and he allows Arthur, grown to the stature of Mephistopheles, to answer him imperturbably with the long speech beginning: “The truth, friend! Where is the truth?”

Other great men have uttered similar la-

ments, but few have been so persistently incapable of self-consolation. Thackeray has neither the pride of Leopardi, the exultation of Lucretius nor the Preacher's acquiescence in the happiness of work well done. His mystery is that of an intensely creative mind unnerved, and of a man made to enjoy but doomed to lamentation. He desired success, popularity, friends, love—and he found them: he knew enthusiasm and the intoxicating joy of young ambition realised. Yet he writes as one who has no love, who has spurned ambition and whose enthusiasm has turned to bitterness. Nevertheless, he could write his great novels, surveying large tracts of life with unfailing penetration, creating his characters with never-wearying care, vicariously sympathising with every emotion and desire of human hearts. The mere extent of his art, into which so much observation, humour and eloquence were thrown, should have been the very affirmation with which to overthrow his doubts and warm his soul. But for Thackeray this could not be, and the tongue of fire he needed, which would have made him, not a finer artist, but a greater poet, never descended upon him. For the great poets come near to all men, but Thackeray, to use his own words, remained an infinite isolation.

IV

THE EGOIST

SOME critics of to-day would, I believe, register scorn on hearing that any novel of George Meredith's could be reckoned under the head of enchantment, and one might go so far with them as to admit that the effect which Meredith counted upon issuing from the stroke of Comedy was something more robust and intellectual; but scorn for George Meredith's work in general only rebounds upon the scornful. The literary fortunes of such a writer are bound to vary with successive currents of taste and opinion, but that they will ever approach bankruptcy is certainly not to be thought of.

To his readers of any particular moment, whether they be few or many, Meredith's reputation may safely be left. / He demands of them education, the faculty of steady reflection, an interest in ideas rather than incidents and a somewhat abnormal promptitude in following

metaphor. He gives them a great deal in return. If it be true that the psychological effect of great art is the organisation of good impulses in the percipient, then Meredith's art is great, for the impulses which it organises are those of liberty, enthusiasm, healthy-mindedness, alertness, self-discipline and wise laughter at folly. He was a penetrating reader of human motives and a keen critic of outworn dogmas. Tyranny, pedantry and sloth of mind or body were abhorrent to him, and it was to lashing these and encouraging their opposites that he united his analytical power and his poetic vision. In the name of Comedy he was a moralist, but he gave his morals the form of art. Many of the causes for which he fought have triumphed since his day : in fact, the state of society which excited his irony is as extinct as the Austrian domination of Italy. Yet the art remains, with its shining virtues and its obvious defects—the art of *Vittoria* no less than that of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *Evan Harrington*, *Harry Richmond*, *Diana of the Crossways*, *Beauchamp's Career* and *The Egoist*.

His defects may repel, but there is surely enough in this list—of his major works alone—to outweigh, if not to cancel, any just repulsion. His frequent over-emphasis and boisterous

flights of a peculiar fancy, his exaggerated dislike for the obvious and the trite, his faulty ear for the cadences of English prose, an occasional grossness or want of fine taste, and a technique in dialogue which produces an effect of unreality, even, sometimes, of absurdity—these are the main heads of legitimate blame. We need not blink them, if we remember that George Meredith, like Carlyle, like Charles Lamb and—one might truly say—like Shakespeare, was so compounded as necessarily to be a mannerist. His mental progresses were abnormal, to an extent of which he, of course, was quite unconscious. He did not willingly torture our English tongue, nor deliberately intend to daze our minds with fantasias of elliptical imagery and irritate us with that somewhat garish verbal repartee which figured for him as “wit,” preferably Celtic. The very gifts which gave him originality and an individual coign of critical vantage made him also, at times, volcanically obscure, bombastic and difficult of comprehension. However much we may regret his projection of his peculiar self into his work, it is of little use to protest against it or state it as a flat condemnation. It was inevitable. Moreover, if Meredith’s prose is often involved, difficult and

inharmonious, his thought is not obscure. A little patience will always find the thread, which is never trivial nor unworthy. But he was a rhapsodist as well as a thinker, and one must hear and see the rhapsodist. The face and the voice of George Meredith, if we had known them, would have made many a rough place smooth.

I may, perhaps, confess a personal preference for *The Egoist* without defending my preference in detail. A general vote would place it high, in any case. In one of his letters Meredith said that it contained but half himself and that his friend would like *The Amazing Marriage* better. His meaning is clear. In *The Egoist* he suppressed, or tried to suppress, the rhapsodist, the gargantuan humours, the imaginative acrobatics. He used the eagle's eye but pinioned its wings. He constrained himself, like his Muse of Comedy handling the great Book of Earth, to "condense whole sections in a sentence and volumes in a character": he focussed his gaze upon a narrow scene and a short span of time. His concentration was not in vain: it gave firmness to his construction, ease to his narrative, brilliance to his portraiture and finality to his argument. Perhaps that is why *The Egoist* lasts so well, in

spite of its faded Victorian setting. The top-hats and strapped trousers, the shawls and veils and ample skirts, the heavy dinner-parties, the riding hacks, the barouches, the secluded park-existence have passed away; men have no rights, women no reticences, and both sexes, having no taste for elegant verbal fence amid suave avenues, frankly pound one another with hard-hit tennis balls. The circumstances that compounded a Willoughby Patterne are already legendary, and he himself appears almost as preposterous as a Polynesian image in a museum, yet the essential comedy remains to engage our emotions as freshly as ever, because Meredith has made Willoughby's self-delusions and discomfitures the symbol of that eternal comedy which is played by the dominating impulses of man. *The Egoist* has a lasting effect upon an intelligent reader, stimulating new emotions, arousing recognitions, untangling confusions in his mind and thus working in him a change which may outlive any particular memories of it. This is the unfailing quality of art upon high levels.

The story of *The Egoist* is a very simple one in outline. Sir Willoughby Patterne, a young baronet, wealthy, handsome, witty, who has

grown up amid the effusive adulation of his county, is concerned to find a wife and mistress of Patterne Hall. He had been jilted once by a girl, who had fled from his too dominating embraces straight into the arms of another husband. He himself had jilted Laetitia Dale, his constant adorer, who still lived and still adored under her invalid father's roof, which was in the park of Patterne. These are preliminaries. The real action opens with the capture by Sir Willoughby from among many admirers of the young, beautiful and spirited Clara Middleton, daughter of a pedantic old scholar. Clara has begged for six months' grace before marriage, but has consented to a solemn plighting of troth. She and Dr. Middleton come to spend three weeks before the wedding at Patterne Hall. In all the circumstances that minister to Sir Willoughby's intense self-love Clara sees the glamour which had won her fall off and reveal a distasteful tyrant. She is resolved to escape, but finds the tenacity of Sir Willoughby overpowering. Her desperate efforts only succeed when they have driven him, in his acute fear of wounds to his vanity from the world's derision, to indulge in double-dealing, which a chance discovers. Sir Willoughby's plan, when he

found the rebel incorrigible, had been to marry his adoring Laetitia after all, and practically to force Clara upon his cousin and secretary, the scholar Vernon Whitford. What happens is that he is compelled to release Clara unconditionally, but to sue on his knees for a new Laetitia who has learned to see him as he is, and who lashes him painfully with her opinion of him before she consents to become, without love, his wife and helper. Clara and Vernon Whitford, who had unconsciously become lovers, pair off with their creator's blessing as two who have nobly come through their ordeal.✓

This theme of a young girl, entrapped in her ignorance into an engagement which she soon finds repulsive and forced into desperate flounderings to regain her liberty, has nothing surprising or uncommon about it. Any novelist might adopt it, and we can almost imagine how a given novelist would treat it. Thackeray's drama, for instance, would have been one of innocence escaping from corruption, with Clara as the lovely, honest and rather stupid dove, Sir Willoughby as the brilliant falcon with a slight odour of disreputability holding his victim in his claws amid the sniggers of worldly and corrupt society, and

Vernon Whitford as the lowly and steadfast lover of romance, whose flame is ignored by his mistress till the day of deliverance. Henry James, again, would have been tempted to make Clara an American damsel, some bright-souled but ignorant Milly from New England, who had yielded her hand in an ardour of enthusiasm for the Old World, mysterious, enchanting, the scene of legend and romance, of venerable beauty, state and ceremony. She would have plighted herself simply and modestly yet with secret passion in what Henry James called the "American Scene," against which the figure of Sir Willoughby, *sauve* and debonair, would have stood out as a deliverer rescuing a parched maiden from a desolation of mere modernity. She would have come to Patterne Hall under the wing, not of a pedant father, but of a rigid and less impressionable aunt or confidant, to find that Europe held poison in its powerful spell. Gradually, punctuated by agonising debates and hesitations, the truth would be driven into her unsullied heart that underneath all the inexpressible loveliness of ancient towers, smiling parks, exquisite villages, deference, courtliness and perfect social amenity there was something rotten and miasmic to which the natives were

accustomed, but against which she, bright, simple Milly, had not been inoculated. She would be like a fly caught in a web—a web which Henry James's imagination could weave with extraordinary mastery. Every morning would bring her against some fresh bewilderment, some moral assumption or some supple action which, in her light of the New World, could only appear doubtful and degrading. And then at last she would fly, with a lovely resignation, back to her less complicated home, another victim to the unhealthy fascination of ancient Europe. And it would have been through the eye of Vernon Whitford, an American anglicised and toughened like Henry James himself, that he might have projected the whole drama, with infinite and protracted sympathy for both points of view, and with a tendency to suggest the moral that Patterne's magnificent ease and splendour only just compensated for its want of Milly's honest simplicity. It would have been left vague whether Vernon, having seen Milly off at Southampton, remained unrepentant in Kundry's garden, or, issuing unostentatiously by the back-door, returned himself, after a decent interval, to be purified and marry Milly-Clara in the bright New England air.

Anybody can translate the theme of *The Egoist* into other guises ranging from the purely romantic to the most recent psychoanalytical, and it will not be entirely a waste of ingenuity to do so if, in the light of the process, George Meredith's own treatment of his theme is thrown into relief. ✓ The clash between Clara and Sir Willoughby, as he sees it, is certainly not one of mere sentiment, nor a conflict between mere goodness and badness picturesquely staged to excite emotion. Clara is not an angel and Sir Willoughby is anything but a villain : indeed, Meredith is at pains to display his hero as a thoroughly admirable person when judged by common worldly standards, and at no less pains to admit, while excusing, the danger that a girl of Clara's temperament, "not pure of nature" but "pure of will," may overstep the bounds of delicacy in desperate situations. On the other hand, it is not purely the situation—what Henry James called the "case"—which interested Meredith : he did not concentrate all his imagination and enthusiasm on heightening by cunning suggestion and constructive artifice the opposition between what Clara and what Sir Willoughby respectively "stood for," just to leave it there for the spectator's benefit as a work of art

triumphantly "done." He was not the artist alone, but moralist and judge as well. He was profoundly concerned with the issue, since he had stated the case as an example: he analysed and condemned the human motives and social practices which caused the crime before devising a punishment to fit it. He treated his material with the touch of an artist, but he chose it with the eye of a philosopher.

In Meredith's novels it is the artist who constructs, paints and occasionally embroiders, but it is the moralist who meditates and directs: and the moralist, like Dr. Middleton in a happy mood, not seldom overpowers his companion. The blend of these two impulses, if not always perfect in practice, was Meredith's ideal and his peculiar virtue as a novelist. In his brilliant prelude to *The Egoist*, as in his longer *Essay on Comedy*, he personified this ideal in the Comic Spirit, the corrector of pretentiousness, dulness, and rawness, "the ultimate civiliser, the polisher, a sweet cook." Meredith's comedy is no libidinous spirit of La Dive Bouteille, much less an airily tripping Good-Humoured Lady, laughing unconcernedly over the confusion of a company of masks. She is something a governess; she

wields a birch rod ; she insists upon the laughter of reason ; she illuminates and epitomises the biggest book on earth, the Book of Egoism. Her spectacles and her rod instil some portentousness into her laughter, yet we would not have her otherwise. She is real, she is unique, and she has all the merits with which Meredith endowed her. Of this all his work is proof, but *The Egoist* above all.

“The Egoist surely inspires pity. He who would desire to clothe himself at everybody’s expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the actual person. . . .

“You may as well know him out of hand, as a gentleman of our time and country, of wealth and station ; a not flexile figure, do what we may with him. . . .

“Aforetime a grand old Egoism built the House. It would appear that ever finer essences of it are demanded to sustain the structure ; but especially it would appear that a reversion to the gross original, beneath a mask and in a vein of fineness, is an earthquake at the foundations of the House.”

These passages from the last page of the Prelude give the essence of the case as Meredith

stated it. His misdemeanant is not the egoist in general, but an egoist whom the refinement of civilisation should have purged of his grossness. He indicts his Sir Willoughby, an outwardly exquisite production of breeding, education and fortune, for relapsing into the state of cave-primitiveness in his behaviour to women. Moreover, as a radical patriot, he is moved to tilt at the conditions of country-gentlemanhood, as being the hotbed of a retrograde and unworthy self-love, of stiff-necked conservatism, pompousness and injustice. He pictures the gentleman as beset by imps, ready to plague him into an antic dance on the first outbreak of his almost inevitable folly. The dance which his imps led Sir Willoughby is the gist of his novel, and it gains its power from the fact that in Sir Willoughby's capers, remorselessly described, each of us recognises some figures in the particular tarantella to which his own vanity is prone to sting him.

Meredith presents his story as a satirical comedy of society, which was to be swift and lucid, full of brilliant dialogue and rich in dramatic surprises. Throughout the book, from his boisterous fantasia on Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's remark that Willoughby

had "a leg" to the scene at the end where a drawing-roomful of characters is held for inordinate length at cross purposes, one continually catches him figuratively rubbing his hands at his enthusiastic view of the coruscation which he fanned with an endearing but irritating assiduity. For so penetrating a mind Meredith was, in some respects, profoundly ingenuous, and never more so than when, with naïve delight, he is exploiting a character like Colonel de Craye, the dashing Irish officer with a gift for elaborate verbal repartee and Celtic hyperbole. This woman-killer, who is introduced that Willoughby, Laetitia Dale and Vernon Whitford may all falsely suspect Clara of meditating flight with him, crackles intolerably, and all with the air of being the most brilliant stage-rattle since Congreve's day. The depressing effect which he had whenever he appears is pathetic, and the worst is that he affects the other characters whenever they come into contact with him. He pricks Willoughby into exploding preposterous squibs of his own, and his effect on poor Clara is sadly apparent in the climax of their dialogue on horseback.

"De Craye was heated by his gallop to

venture on the angling question : ‘ Am I to hear the names of the bridesmaids? ’

“ The pace had nerved Clara to speak to it sharply : ‘ There is no need.’ ”

“ ‘ Have I no claim? ’ ”

“ She was mute.

“ ‘ Miss Lucy Darleton, for instance; whose name I am almost as much in love with as Crossjay.’ ”

“ ‘ She will not be bridesmaid to me.’ ”

“ ‘ She declines? Add my petition, I beg.’ ”

“ ‘ To all? or to her? ’ ”

“ ‘ Do all the bridesmaids decline? ’ ”

“ ‘ The scene is too ghastly.’ ”

“ ‘ A marriage? ’ ”

“ ‘ Girls have grown sick of it.’ ”

“ ‘ Of weddings? We’ll overcome the sickness.’ ”

“ ‘ With some.’ ”

“ ‘ Not with Miss Darleton? You tempt my eloquence.’ ”

“ ‘ You wish it? ’ ”

“ ‘ To win her consent? Certainly.’ ”

“ ‘ The scene ! ’ ”

“ ‘ Do I wish that? ’ ”

“ ‘ Marriage ! ’ exclaimed Clara, dashing into the ford, etc. . . . ”

It must be put down as a weakness of Meredith's that he was apt to get more fun out of his comic characters than he managed to give his readers; and in *The Egoist*, in spite of touches which are truly comic, we must write down most of Dr. Middleton, the pedantic bear, timorous of women and fond of port, Dr. Corney, another purveyor of Celtic wit, the impossible conversation at luncheon where Lady Culmer and Lady Busshe are mystified by de Craye and the final delirium in the drawing-room round poor, dazed Mr. Dale, on the side of this weakness. These are not Comedy but a kind of elevated buffoonery, which is out of tune. Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson would have hit the mark if she had said of her creator, "he has an uncertain ear." Capable of exquisite beauty and true wit, Meredith too often fell short of both by striving too mightily for them, like the tenor in Balzac's story, who, in a supreme effort to surpass his own art for his mistress's ear, made, in effect, the most painful noises.

Nevertheless, when these lapses and over-insistences are eliminated, there remains a residue that may worthily be called High Comedy. The preparation for the main action—apart from the leg-fantasia—is swift and

pointed. Willoughby is admirably introduced, and the episode of Constantia, and of Willoughby's wooing of Laetitia on the rebound, but only to jilt her, are presented to us with a light hand and easy mastery. The essentials of Willoughby, though a trifle over-satirised, are in our minds before Clara arrives on the scene. We see him pampered and selfish, capable of brutal rudeness to a kinsman, painfully sensitive to the world's tongue, and obstinately retentive of a woman's heart, Laetitia's, which he insists on holding without paying for it. The account in the fourth chapter of Willoughby's voyage and of his ecstatic greetings to Laetitia on return, with the final picture of a constant woman, disappointed but adoring, is one of the most effective passages that Meredith ever wrote. And when Clara appears, her chase and capture, the birth of her first doubts, Willoughby's impatience to dominate her mind entirely, his overpowering possessiveness—"He led her about the flower-beds; too much as if he were giving a convalescent an airing"—his naïve obstinacy in exposing the worst of himself with entire complacency, and the particular examples of his selfishness—his tyrannous behaviour to the boy Crossjay and

his callous schemes to retain Vernon as his useful dependent—are told quickly and pointedly with a flash of humour blended with scorn which is Meredith's own. With the two pages of wrathful reflection upon the egoist in the love-season, Clara's run with Crossjay and her thought, "were I to marry, and run!", her vision of Vernon under the wild cherry and their talk, she eager and he obtuse, of mountains and of liberty, the final touches are given to the setting for the main action, Clara's revolt and victory, Willoughby's resistance and speciously covered defeat, which lasts for the economical space of seven days.

This main action is artistically conceived. Clara's pathetic attempts to substitute Laetitia for herself and to obtain release by mere asking, their consummate parrying by Willoughby and her father's surrender to old port, lead to her flight in the rain. Her change of mind at the station and return, unrepentant, to a Willoughby dismayed by the sense of things working against him mark the turning-point. From the moment when Willoughby "fluted exceedingly" to Laetitia, like a knight in armour attempting pathos, he becomes the sport of the imps. He tries to play two games, that of holding Clara and tempting Vernon to

marry Laetitia, and that of seeking refuge in the heart over which his power had never failed while adroitly contriving to cast Clara to Vernon as a bone to a dog. He is riddled by Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's wit, stung by Lady Busshe's vulgarity, and driven to make himself ridiculous to Laetitia while still inflamed by Clara's beauty; he is refused, incredibly, by his faithful adorer, he is again tempted by Clara, he is betrayed by Crossjay, routed by Mrs. Jenkinson and finally brought to his knees by Laetitia. Only by abject submission is the Egoist's face saved to the world. It was a brilliant conception and, in many details, was brilliantly carried out. What, indeed, could be finer comedy of purest inspiration than, for example, Willoughby's preparation of Laetitia's mind (Chapter XIV) to marry another without losing her devotion to himself, or Clara's dialogue with Whitford at the railway inn, or Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's good-humoured thrusts in Chapter XXXIV; and what, in the realm of grace and charm, could be better than Clara's dialogues with Crossjay, and the beautiful presentation of the boy's character in Crossjay himself, one of the few personages who does not appear too often?

Yes, there is Comedy enough in *The Egoist*, both in its conception and execution; there is much happy—as well as unhappy—dialogue, notably that of Clara with Laetitia and with Vernon; there is a light grace of youth in Crossjay and even poetry in the description of Clara advancing over the lawn, “a sight to set the woodland dancing, and turn the heads of the town.” Yet, if Comedy were all, one would have to say it was Comedy got singularly out of hand and flouting all the canons of comic proportion.

Fifty chapters is a long run for a Comic Spirit which “conceives a definite situation for a number of characters, and rejects all accessories in the exclusive pursuit of them, and their speech.” There are two audiences to every dramatic presentation, the fictitious audience of the characters themselves and the real audience of the spectators or readers. Meredith, with his ebullient imagination and his passionately communicative mind, could never peg himself down to that economy which ensures that the amount of explanation sufficient to prime the fictitious audience with its necessary intelligence of the action shall also be sufficient for the real audience. Being a philosopher and a moralist, his eye was fixed

upon his real audience, whom he suspected, not without some reason, of having an intelligence and a power of seizing illuminating connections of ideas far below his own. He felt himself bound to enlighten them, like the *conférencier* in a *revue*, with comments on the inner meaning of the passing show and disquisitions upon human nature, as exemplified in his drama. That is why the skirts of his Comedy are so voluminous; he puffs them out continually with the wind of his own spirit.

These philosophical or analytical interpolations are the things which, above all, give Meredith's novels their particular character. Not to appreciate them is not to appreciate Meredith, for they are the essential distillations of his mind; and though they hamper the dash and velocity with which, in his intention, the action should have been endowed, they enrich immeasurably the content of the whole work, giving it massiveness, durability and a hold upon the higher regions of the mind. *The Egoist* would be only a pale ghost of itself without these typical contributions from its author, and there are few of them that we could wish away. Who, for instance, would willingly expunge the wisdom with which the classic fourteenth chapter—"Sir Willoughby and

Laetitia"—opens? "In the hundred and fourth chapter of the thirteenth volume of the Book of Egoism it is written : Possession without obligation to the object possessed approaches felicity." The brilliant enlargement upon this text, which reveals at once the acuteness and amplitude of Meredith's vision, is both an admirable piece of philosophy in itself and a good preparation for the ensuing dialogue. Chapter XXIII, again, calls a protracted halt, but not a halt without profit. The disquisition upon the human delusion that good fruit will come of the union of temper and policy, and the penetrating analysis of Willoughby's form of the delusion, if it is an excrescence upon pure form, is exhilaratingly shrewd. In how many injured minds is not Willoughby's day-dream of magnanimous triumph over a discomfited and too late repentant Clara most accurately repeated? And who has more eloquently chastised his sex's weakness than Meredith in the concluding pages of this chapter, with his picture of Willoughby "flaming verdigris" and his rebuke to primitive masculinity? "Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man, or they shoot us higher than the topmost star. But it is as we please. . . . They

are to us what we hold of best or worst within. By their state is our civilisation judged: and if it is hugely animal still, that is because primitive men abound and will have their pasture." A similar long halt is called at the thirty-ninth chapter—"In the Heart of the Egoist"—which is a notable sermon on egoism full of arrows that fly to the conscience of every man. It shows Willoughby, in an agony of self-pity, deciding that Clara must be given up and planning with a dark diplomacy how she shall be so given up as to appear discarded; and, in parenthesis, Meredith reflects upon primitive man and society in striking metaphors which do not conceal his unerring intelligence, pointing to primitive man as the prime egoist and presenting Willoughby as the socialised development of this elementary being, who has discovered a "greater realm than that of the sensual appetites."

"He slew imagination"—what a lightning stroke, and how it hits each man of us! Who can lay his hand on his heart and say that, in converse with a woman, he has never "dragged her through the labyrinths of his penetralia" and wilfully, insistently, slain imagination?

There are other and slighter passages of this kind in *The Egoist* which hold the quintes-

sence of Meredithianism. The reader knows them or can find them for himself. It is to be noted that they are not sheer digressions in Sterne's Shandean manner, but, though they may include some moralisation in general, they are in the main an illumination of character, especially of the leading characters, Willoughby and Clara.

And this consideration leads us to a closer view of those two characters, as Meredith so fully presented them to us. Nobody, of course, can read *The Egoist* without experiencing a deep and lasting impression of Willoughby and Clara. They are types which we know to be true, and peculiarly English, in essentials, if not in every detail. So vivid, indeed, are both of them that many a reader, by a natural process of mind, is drawn to think of them as real, to estimate their characters and react emotionally to their vicissitudes as if they were historical personages or his own acquaintances. These estimates and these reactions are coloured by the reader's own personality, for it is by ourselves, and not by impersonal standards, that we judge all people, especially our friends and our enemies. We cannot help ourselves in this respect, and the novelist encourages us; for it is an unsuccessful narrator who does not

stimulate his hearers to adopt these personal and emotional attitudes towards the figments of his brain. His success is the quality which we call vividness. Yet, after all, this vividness, in a novel, is the creation of one mind and not life itself; and therefore the greater the vividness of the characters, the more interesting it is, if possible, to hold our personal reactions in abeyance for a moment and to observe exactly how and with what intention, with what felicities and what inconsistencies, our novelist has presented them. It is a task for second or third reading, and often attended with surprises, convicting us not seldom of inattention and unfounded prejudice. Such an observation of those interesting characters, Sir Willoughby Patterne, Clara Middleton and Laetitia Dale, could only be elaborated in writing at unpardonable length : but one or two notes may, perhaps, be attempted as instances of these observations—let us not call them analysis, which is an ugly word, savouring of coldness, chemistry, and glamour dissipated. Truly they are not dissections of dead bones but researches into the secrets of intense life.

Meredith presented his leading characters in two ways—from the outside, by recounting

their speech and actions, and from the inside by placing us, he playing Virgil to our Dante, inside the tortuous passages of their minds, to observe at length the thoughts and passions and fancies working within them. His minor characters are presented from the outside only; and it is an interesting, though rather baffling, light upon Vernon Whitford that Meredith hardly ever takes us inside his mind, and then but briefly. If this is why Vernon seems an oddly flat and angular character, one wonders why Meredith so presented Clara's successful lover. Yet the effect is undeniable: the shy, awkward, intellectual, scrupulously honest scholar, singularly obtuse to a woman's meaning and distrustful of emotion, is wonderfully vivid seen in his two dimensions against the full three dimensions of Willoughby and the two ladies. Of Willoughby and Clara, however, is it not true that, whereas the external presentation of the former—a necessarily satirical presentation—is exaggerated even to absurdity while the internal presentation is profound and convincing, with the latter it is just the reverse? Meredith's Clara, as seen and heard, wins every heart, but when he takes us into her mind, our mentor becomes overpowering, for so impressed is he with the con-

fusion of a young and spirited girl's thoughts that he must make the confusion worse by his flood of metaphors.

Willoughby has often been thought preposterous; and so he is, if you only regard his conversation. Meredith wished to present him as a man of brilliant gifts and impressive personality, as one not unworthy of the neighbourhood's admiration; yet if you read aloud the speeches put into his mouth from the very beginning, it is impossible to give them an intonation which makes them seem other than comic. They are the speeches of a "character" part, of an intolerably pompous and stilted fellow whose absurdity no Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson would have missed for an instant. Hear him when he greets Laetitia after his return from a long voyage.

"He sprang to the ground and seized her hand. 'Laetitia Dale!' he said. He panted. 'Your name is sweet English music! And you are well?' The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go. . . ."

These few lines epitomise the whole contrast between the two presentations of Willoughby.

By his words he stamps himself an affected nincompoop; and then follows the thrust of Meredith's true wit. "He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go." It is the biting presentation of the inner Willoughby, of masculine egoism dramatised, which makes him an individual work of art, ever living, ever true. One could follow this contrast in detail throughout the book; it is the contrast between the work of an imperfect ear and an unerring mind. When the external Willoughby is before us we sympathise with Clara far more than Meredith intended, for who, on reading any of his dialogues with Clara—such a speech, for instance, as that beginning: "Whenever the little brain is in doubt, perplexed, undecided which course to adopt, she will come to me, will she not? I shall always listen,"—does not find his heart charged, like Sir Toby's when observing Malvolio's posturings, with opprobrious expletives? Yet, no sooner is the glass turned inwards than Willoughby takes on another stature. He no longer "has a leg," but becomes an embodiment of human passions and inquietudes. As we see him, say, in Chapter XXIX, restlessly pacing his chamber in first astonished presentiment that things are

mysteriously going against him, or at the end of Chapter XXXI suddenly complacent at having drawn tears from Laetitia, or at the close of Chapter XXXVII—a wonderful passage—deliberately creating a beautiful image of the faded Laetitia to satisfy his vanity, Willoughby swells to heroic proportions. Without recognising these proportions we cannot estimate Meredith's creation truly, for only by submitting ourselves to its element of poetic greatness can we justly criticise its imperfections.

Clara Middleton is one of that bevy of enchanting young women in the creation of whom Meredith expressed his ardent but, from modern standpoints, moderate feminism. His mastery in presenting these characters has been justly praised, and there is no need to enlarge upon the brilliance, the virginal freshness, the seductiveness and the generous burning spirit with which he has endowed Clara. The effect of her physical beauty, perfectly apparent, is more striking for the absence of fleshliness : the agony of her situation is all the sharper for the rigid exclusion of pathos. Meredith, perhaps, was over-cautious in approaching the regions of sentimentality. How many authors would have cast away that chance of melting

the heart which Meredith had when he imagined Clara's first confession of her unhappiness to Vernon Whitford? Willoughby had commissioned Clara to use all her arts to persuade Vernon to marry Laetitia. The conversation took place in the library: it ended in tears and a headache. Clara had "cast aside the silly mission entrusted to her by Sir Willoughby and wept for herself." Clara's tears and her irritation at Vernon's "logical coolness of expostulation" are recorded, but the conversation is not. Colonel de Craye saw Clara as "a heavenly soul," with half a dozen of the tricks of earth"; but Meredith did not deign, or did not dare, to display the natural earthly trick of a girl's sobbing in a passion of incoherent sentences. That is how her conversation with Vernon must have ended, and it would have given her another touch of humanity had it not been left wholly to our imagination. But Meredith could only bring himself to treat tears more elaborately, as when Clara repudiates Laetitia's hint that she is jealous.

" ' But now,' said Clara, swimming on the wave in her bosom, ' I tax you with the silliest suspicion ever entertained by one of your rank.

Lady, you have deemed me capable of one of the meanest of our vices!—Hold this hand, Laetitia, my friend, will you? Something is going on in me.’

“Laetitia took her hand, and saw and felt that something was going on.

“Clara said : ‘ You are a woman.’

“It was her effort to account for something.

“She swam for a brilliant instant on tears, and yielded to the overflow.”

That is altogether too much of a good thing, an instance of the Meredithian excessive, only to be noted as part of the dross which came out of his rich crucible.

Nevertheless, though Meredith’s dialogue always needs a certain amount of translation to give it a natural effect in ears not tuned to Meredith’s peculiar pitch, the external presentation of Clara is not strained or unnatural. Her bright and generous spirit shines out always, especially when she is with Crossjay; and, at the end of the struggle, in her unconscious victory over Mrs. Jenkinson and the final dialogues with Laetitia and Vernon, she rises to the height of what she is—a beautiful figure of an English girl, touched with poetry.

But in the internal presentation of Clara, acutely penetrating though it is, we hear too

strongly the accents of Meredith, which drowned the confused murmurs of a perplexed girl's heart. Meredith's feminism was of the kind which demanded for women, not so much liberty of action as liberty of mind and will; and in his great women heroines it is the treasures and high qualities of their spirit which he displays and insists on. In *The Egoist*, when he envisages the possibility of a real fugue on Clara's part, with de Craye or any other man, he becomes quite anxious and apologetic on her behalf; while in supporting the claims to self-determination of her swift and vigorous spirit he is a bold and scornful challenger of repressive, masculine "Turkishness."

His difficulty, as a novelist, however, is always how to photograph in words the workings of a woman's mind. He cannot do it, in fact : he comprehends, but cannot reproduce, and has therefore to fall back upon the reasonings and images of his own man's mind as his only means of expressing the directly inexpressible. Chapter XXI of *The Egoist*, entitled "Clara's Meditations," is a good example of this insufficiency. Dr. Middleton, under the influence of old port, has gone back on his promise to take her away, and she is tossing in sleepless fury at the disappointment, and

giving a free rein to her passionate desire to escape somehow, anyhow, from the toils in which she is caught. Meredith's method of describing her thoughts, half narrative, half a vicarious introspection, is not happy : we understand, but the voice of the novelist, wrestling in rhetoric and metaphor, comes between us and Clara. At the time when Clara, alone in her bed, is being simple, naïve, elemental, Meredith, with an air of having drawn the bed-curtains, yet of peeping in, now and then, to note characteristic movements, orates with brilliance and complication on the hearthrug. A woman in the toils was his darling theme, and he invariably adorned it with acutest observations, but not invariably with dramatic power or vivid characterisation. He is best, then, when he is frankly moralising, and his Clara for the moment no more than a philosophic instance, as here, when the question whether other men were like Willoughby shoots through Clara's mind. Meredith at once interpolates one of his witty and penetrating commentaries.

“ Maidens are commonly reduced to read the masters of their destinies by their instincts ; and when these have been edged by over-activity, they must hoodwink their maidenli-

ness to suffer themselves to be read : and then they must dupe their minds, else men would soon see they were gifted to discern. Total ignorance being their pledge of purity to men, they have to expunge the writing of their percepts on the tablets of the brain : they have to know not when they do know. The instinct of seeking to know, crossed by the task of blotting knowledge out, creates that conflict of the natural with the artificial creature to which their ultimately-revealed double-face, complained of by ever-dissatisfied men, is owing. Wonder in no degree that they indulge a craving to be fools, or that many of them act the character. Jeer at them as little for not showing growth. You have reared them to this pitch, and at this pitch they have partly civilised you. Supposing you to want it done wholly, you must yield just as many points in your requisitions as are needed to let the wits of young women reap their due harvest and be of good use to their souls. You will then have a fair battle, a braver, with better results."

The whole gist of Meredith's fight on women's behalf is contained in this spirited outburst, but it is a heavy accompaniment to the fancies of a young girl's *nuit blanche*.

He continues immediately, knitting it aptly enough to the context: "Clara's inner eye traversed Colonel de Craye at a shot." We can pardon him much for that, for it is essential to Meredith's Clara that, while not realising the danger of de Craye, she should never for a moment take a false view of this rattling lady-killer.

Were these notes not already too long, much might be said of Laetitia Dale. As a perfectly finished and never exaggerated character she is, perhaps, better than any. More than any other she keeps the Comedy at its high level, when the overdone pomposities of Willoughby or the fizzling fireworks of de Craye threaten to let it down. And no incident is more dramatic than the change in her view of Willoughby which began when he "fluted exceedingly" to her at midnight in the drawing-room—a delicious scene—and culminated in her remorseless flaying of him in the presence of his protesting aunts. Meredith did not always find the just intonation for his delicate yet spirited perception of true Comedy, but the character of Laetitia Dale proves that he could do so on occasion, and then triumphantly. Also, a complete account of Meredith's feminism would need to include some observations upon Laetitia, for his view of her as a fading

flower, cheated unfairly of her gatherer, points to its limitations. There was a remarkable absence of nambi-pambiness in Meredith's idealism, and he would never have hesitated to offend the extremer champions. When he pointed out to his own generation that its attitude to women was an outrage to Nature, he meant Nature and not an ideological abstraction; and he grieves, rather than exults, that in the solitude of a Laetitia and a Diana, Nature was, in some measure, thwarted. There was a solid robustness at the bottom of Meredith which kept him from ever "fluting exceedingly," for all his exuberance, or from posturing, like Sir Willoughby as the "gauntleted Knight attempting the briny handkerchief." Indeed, it is curious that in Meredith the airy balloonings of the wit among dullards, of the Celt prodding Saxons and of the Radical twitting Tory backwardness are firmly anchored to the earth by a sheer dead-weight of English yeoman common-sense. He could toss it about, as he tossed his iron "beetle" in his garden, but he could not fly away with it. And this, no doubt, is one reason for confidence in the durability of Meredith's art: it is grafted upon a stock so sturdy that only a cataclysm could blow it away.

V

ROXANA

DANIEL DEFOE, one of the most stupendous journalists that ever drove a pen, took to writing novels in his old age. He was nearly sixty when he produced *Robinson Crusoe*, and others followed—*The Journal of a Cavalier*, *Captain Singleton*, *Moll Flanders*, and the rest. At sixty-four he wrote *The Fortunate Mistress, or the Lady Roxana*, first published in 1724, which is the fictitious autobiography of a beautiful woman who prospered in evil courses. Mr. Trent, in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, rightly says that in this story Defoe “makes his greatest advance, not a very great one, after all, toward the construction of a well-ordered plot”; but that is a matter of little consequence. All that element in the English novels which we call plot, as well as all that we call sentiment or character-drawing, originate in the later work of Fielding and Richardson. They began a new thing, while Defoe perfected an old one : one may, perhaps,

call it the narrative as distinguished from the novel. The important and impressive quality of Defoe's narratives is that they are works of genius, a genius of sheer representation. One could support this contention from almost any of the great narratives, and I take *Roxana* as approximating most nearly to the complete form of the novel. Nobody could read this work of the imagination without being struck by its amazing freshness. Two hundred years have given no tinge of dulness to its sheen. Little indeed so keen and bright is published under the garish dust-covers of to-day. The air of antiquity which envelops Fielding, for all his liveliness, and Richardson, for all his shrewdness, does not breathe on a single page of *Roxana*, which stands undimmed by any modern comparison, whether it be with Mirabeau's *Journal d'une Femme de Chambre*,* with the dreary *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen*, or with the artificial sentiment of Sudermann's *Das Hohe Lied*. Judged by an authentic record, such as *The Memoirs of William Hickey*, the measure of its mere verisimilitude is extraordinary; and verisimilitude is a poor word in which to sum up its abundant life. In the craft of fiction its

* See Mr. E. A. Baker's introduction to *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* in Routledge's edition.

parallel is, rather, to be found in the best passages of the *Arabian Nights* or of Boccaccio's *Tales*, though Boccaccio's elaborate style is a distraction from which Defoe's reader does not suffer. The extent to which his episodes were inventions of his own or based on other sources is an inquiry only for drudges, for Defoe made all his matter indefeasibly his own. Only a consummate artificer could have written *Roxana*, as the feeble continuations by other hands bears witness; and he was an artificer with an exquisite knowledge of essentials. To read this story is to realise again that a great novel can be written in many ways, and to understand that before the epoch of *Tom Jones* there came into our heritage what Virginia Woolf, in a flashing comment by the way, has called one of the few novels really "written for grown-up people."

Without presumptuously seeking to divine all that presented itself to Mrs. Woolf's nimble perception when she wrote those words, we may be certain, at least, that one idea—a common-place one—was not present. Anybody could perceive that a story of which the heroine calls herself frequently and plumply a whore, was not, in the trite and literal sense, a suitable book for children. It was not to the

subject but to the author's use of it that she was referring. The adventures of Roxana, in truth, apart from an occasional robustness of phraseology, are not in the least startling or revolting to those who have outgrown their first innocence, for in all her relations with men, mercenary though they were, she was a cleanly, decent creature, far too honest in body to be nasty in mind. Moreover, the ostensible morals are admirable : Defoe saw to that with his unscrupulous ingenuity when he imagined Roxana's periodical states of self-reproach and compunction, and impudently pleaded them in his preface, saying :

“ It is true she met with unexpected success in all her wicked courses; but even in the highest elevations of her prosperity she makes frequent acknowledgements that the pleasure of her wickedness was not worth the repentance; and that all the satisfaction she had, all the joy in the view of her prosperity—no, nor all the wealth she rolled in, the gaiety of her appearance, the equipages and the honours she was attended with, could quiet her mind, abate the reproaches of her conscience, or procure her an hour's sleep when just reflection kept her waking.

“The noble inferences that are drawn from this one part are worth all the rest of the story, and abundantly justify, as they are the professed design of, the publication.”

The “noble inferences,” indeed : a sad fellow, Defoe ! He would palm off his book upon the public as a warning to young persons, and there is said to be evidence that many young persons were so warned and forsook their wicked courses before remorse overtook them. The passages in the story from which these “noble inferences” are to be drawn are, as a matter of fact, the least valuable, and only of interest as indicating the direction in which a fiction-writer of Defoe’s day was constrained to conciliate popular sentiment. Few writers can entirely ignore the greater public’s taste, and Defoe, who, as journalist and pamphleteer, had played upon it all his life, could never have been tempted to do so. It is an embarrassing reflection upon our own day that, where now he would have been tempted to exploit the “sob,” the “human,” “the thrill” and all the other horrid stuffs or elements of what fiction-dealers now call a “story,” Defoe had only to interlard a plain tale with some admirably expressed passages of moral self-reproach. No

doubt his public was more than satisfied, and failed, as he intended, to observe that, while artistically quite convincing, Roxana's heart-searchings are wholly devoid of any suasive effect, but show, on the contrary, that periods of nocturnal remorse will never cause the abandonment of completely successful daily practice. The twinges of the soul, as of the liver, have very transitory effects while things are going well. So far, then, by the ingenious importation of a conventional moral, Defoe indulged the childishness of mind which, in all of us and in all ages, long outlasts physical adolescence; but so far only. In all the rest—in the things he recorded and in those he omitted, in his pauses and his rapid transitions, in his portrayal of manners, in his view of character, in the spare but firm simplicity of his prose and in the whole imaginative scale upon which he handles his narrative—he wrote as for minds which, like his own, had reached maturity. Such minds would not be deceived by specious triviality, but would respond to clean outline, significant detail and the delight of those deft but unexpected touches, the secrets of only great artists, which give life, unobtrusively and inimitably, to the work of art.

In bare outline the story of *Roxana* is simply a sequence of events, with an incomplete conclusion : dramatic unity is absent, and there is neither temperamental development nor clash of personality. What the heroine is at the beginning she remains substantially to the end, and her narrative reflects little of the external world or the subtle passage of time, as does, for instance, Mr. Arnold Bennett's *Old Wives' Tale*. The whole interest and significance is to be found in the brightness and strength of the picture which, without any suggestion of background or chiaroscuro, remains upon the surface of things; and the whole merit lies in its being extremely well done, with a surprising inventive power and with consummate literary skill.

It is the autobiography of a woman, born of Huguenot parents, who fled with her to England in 1683 when she was ten years old. At fifteen she marries the son of a brewer, a jovial but incompetent man, who on succeeding his father runs through his property and leaves her completely destitute with five children. These by a stratagem she casts on the protection of her husband's relatives and faces the world alone except for her devoted maid Amy. Her first lover is the landlord of her house, a

kind-hearted and wealthy jeweller whose wife has deserted him. The kindness and affection which he lavishes upon her in her destitution, aided by the materialistic arguments of Amy, persuade her, reluctantly, to sacrifice her virtue and become his unofficial wife. After three years of happy life together and the birth of a son, they take a journey to Paris, where the jeweller is set upon and murdered by thieves. Roxana, having with great astuteness secured possession of a good deal of the jeweller's property, then becomes the mistress of a great nobleman, who treats her for eight years with princely generosity and delicacy. On the prince's conversion to a stricter course of life the lady, after conveying her great wealth safely to England by the kind offices of a Dutch merchant, whose mistress she becomes but whose hand in marriage she then refuses for the sake of preserving her personal liberty, sets up in London as a fashionable beauty.

By a stretch of chronology we are to suppose that Charles II is still King. Roxana's house becomes the *rendezvous* of a gay court set, and it is among them that, by dancing in a Turkish dress, she earns her name. Her first phase in London ends in a three years' retirement—with the king, as we are given to understand : her

second phase finds her mistress of a rich lord, from whom after several years she parts. She now determines, after more than "six-and-twenty years of wickedness," to begin life anew, to which intent she vanishes from the eye of fashionable London and lodges with an amiable Quaker lady near the Minories. At this lodging two interests absorb her—the provision for her children, whom she has traced, without being discovered, and the resumption of relations with the kind Dutch merchant. The Dutch merchant is found to be in London, and, after some ups and downs of courtship and gallantry, he marries her and takes the title of baronet to gratify her. The chief obstacle to her happiness is the unfortunate insistence of one of her own daughters called Susan, who, as it turns out, had been employed by her as a maid during her splendid existence in Pall Mall. Little by little Susan becomes convinced that Roxana is her mother, and leads her a sad dance, for it becomes necessary to get rid of her or outwit her without allowing the husband's suspicions to be aroused. At length, so far as Defoe himself finished the story, Amy makes away with Susan, and Roxana migrates to Holland with her husband, who further gratifies her with the title of

Countess. As Mr. Baker points out, Defoe's own work probably ends with the words :

" Here, after some few years of flourishing and outwardly happy circumstances, I fell into a dreadful course of calamities, and Amy also ; the very reverse of our former good days. The blast of Heaven seemed to follow the injury done the poor girl by us both, and I was brought so low again, that my repentance seemed to be only the consequence of my misery, as my misery was of my crime."

Subsequent editions, published after Defoe's death, endeavoured to give the details of these calamities, but they are of no artistic importance.

Such a story, if it is not to depend for its effect upon the revelation of the narrator's intimate soul or upon the subtle analysis of sentiment, must depend upon the manner of its telling. This is where Defoe triumphs. As a pure story-teller he is supreme in English literature. He wastes no time here on beating about the bush for preliminary sympathy with his heroine, but slips on her petticoat and launches swiftly on his tale. Roxana, having no illusions about herself, asks for no indulgence from her reader : being supremely convinced

of her story's interest, she pours it out in natural, unstrained language.

"Being to give my own character, I must be excused to give it as impartially as possible, and as if I was speaking of another body; and the sequel will lead you to judge whether I flatter myself or no."

This detachment, which is typical of all Defoe's narratives, is not, however, carried to extremes. Even a plain story of adventure needs more than a dummy for its central figure, and Roxana herself is anything but a dummy.

"I was (speaking of myself at about fourteen years of age) tall, and very well made; sharp as a hawk in matters of common knowledge; quick and smart in discourse; apt to be satirical; full of repartee; and a little too forward in conversation, or, as we call it in English, bold, though perfectly modest in my behaviour. Being French born, I danced, as some say, naturally, loved it extremely, and sang well also, and so well that, as you will afterwards hear, it was afterwards some advantage to me. With all these things, I wanted neither wit, beauty, nor money. In this manner I set out

into the world, having all the advantages that any young woman could desire, to recommend me to others, and form a prospect of happy living to myself."

Defoe, judged by modern standards, was not a psychologist, but he drew Roxana's outlines with a firm hand. She charms us from the first with her vivacity, and throughout her history many exquisite touches fill in the portrait of an easy-going and lively woman, the compass of whose cares seldom extended far beyond the present moment. Her two failings, as she freely admits, were love of wealth and vanity, and if these were gratified she passed her days in easy gaiety, giving fully as much pleasure as she received. She does not, in writing, overdo her satirical side, yet her picture of her first husband emphasises admirably that trait.

"He was a jolly, handsome fellow, as any woman need wish for a companion; tall and well made; rather a little too large, but not so as to be ungentle. . . .

"To be out of all business was his delight, and he would stand leaning against a post for half-an-hour together, with a pipe in his mouth, with all the tranquillity in the world,

smoking, like Dryden's countryman, that whistled as he went, for want of thought, and this even when his family was, as it were, starving, that little he had wasting, and that we were all bleeding to death."

And later, when she sees this dolt in Paris as one of the *gens d'armes* and sets a watcher on his track, she gives a summary of the observations which is delightful in its trenchancy :

"By this management I found an opportunity to see what a most insignificant, unthinking life the poor, indolent wretch, who, by his unactive temper, had at first been my ruin, now lived; how he only rose in the morning to go to bed at night, that, saving the necessary motion of the troops, which he was obliged to attend, he was a mere motionless animal, of no consequence in the world; that he seemed to be one who, though he was indeed alive, had no manner of business in life but to stay to be called out of it. He neither kept any company, minded any sport, played at any game, or indeed did anything of moment; but, in short, sauntered about like one that was not two livres value whether he was dead or alive; that when he was gone would leave no remembrance behind him that

ever he was here; that, if ever he did anything in the world to be talked of, it was only to get five beggars and starve his wife."

A woman who can express herself in phrases so clean-cut need never plead for a reader's indulgence: she has his ear at the end of her pen. Roxana holds us so long as she has anything to tell, whether it be the details of her destitution when she sat with two friends in her naked house and Amy came in with "the small breast of mutton and two great bunches of turnips, that she intended to stew for our dinner"; or the generosity of the jeweller which began with his refurnishing the house and paying the butcher eleven shillings and threepence for a "large, very good leg of veal." and "a piece of fore-ribs of roasting beef"; or the dialogue that ensued on Amy's remarking that the gentleman would ask for "a favour by-and-by"; or the brief record of the death of her child at six weeks old, "so all that work was to do over again—that is to say, the charge, the expense, the travail, etc."; or the clear-headed reckonings of her financial prosperity; or the gallantries of a foreign prince who is revealed a finished gentleman; or the storm at sea, or the revelries in London, or the

charming behaviour of her Quaker landlady and the tiresome intrusions of Susan. Who, indeed, could resist a lady so light-heartedly in love with truth as to write, after mentioning her retreat with a king and alluding to her wealth :

“ At the end of what I call my retreat, and out of which I brought a great deal of money, I appeared again, but I seemed like an old piece of plate that had been hoarded up some years, and comes out tarnished and discoloured ; so I came out blown, and looked like a cast-off mistress ; nor, indeed, was I any better, though I was not at all impaired in beauty except I was a little fatter than I was formerly, and always granting that I was four years older. However, I preserved the youth of my temper, was always bright, pleasant in company, and agreeable to everybody, or else everybody flattered me ; and in this condition I came abroad to the world again ” ?

Indeed, Defoe's *Roxana*, though she is not deep, is a wonderfully complete creation, for he realised, in assuming her personality, a woman with a mind of extreme complacency, whose blood, though her life was given to gallantry, was not hot, who took existence

easily and whose happiness was seldom at the mercy of her emotions. How good, for instance, is her account of the temporary penitence with which the storm at sea afflicted Amy and herself ! She compares her own sullen terror with Amy's more vocal self-abandonment to God's mercy, and she philosophically concludes : " It is true Amy's repentance wore off too, as well as mine, but not so soon. However, we were both very grave for a time." And how calmly and convincingly she lays bare the vanity which, yielding to a feverish hope of still marrying the prince, nearly lost her the Dutch merchant for a second time !

Scarcely less complete is the character of Amy, " a cunning wench," a creature of mercurial spirits, of bold speech and all devotion, who prompts her mistress to submit to the kind jeweller's addresses by a frank view of the material question, and who, in her joy at his kindness to her mistress, " got up two or three times in the night and danced about the room in her shift." In Amy, who remains attached to her mistress's fortunes throughout, becoming her housekeeper, her stewardess, her inquiry agent, her almoner, and finally her indignant and remorseless protector

against the inconvenient assaults of her own child, Defoe gives a remarkable picture of a maid's fidelity, without any sentimental exaggerations. One of the most striking passages in the whole story, in fact, is the anything but sentimental account of Roxana's consenting to Amy's debauchery by the jeweller, in a spirit of playfulness. In relating this incident Defoe keeps purely to the bright surface of things, but it was an unusually acute piece of observation on his part that a woman like Roxana, having become for the first time a man's kept mistress, and partly at the instigation of her maid, should instinctively wish to get rid of that maid's one element of superiority to herself—namely, that she was still virtuous. Defoe, of course, having observed the congruity of Amy's undoing to his whole conception, did not violate the proprieties by making Roxana talk of instincts. To do so would have been entirely out of her part. Instead, she attributes her misdeed, as she naturally would, to the loose gaiety in which she indulged with her lover in Amy's presence and to her own laxity of moral sense in regard to a lover as distinct from a husband. In spite of her ostensible compunction Roxana rattles off the tale merrily enough.

" Amy was dressing me one morning, for now I had two maids, and Amy was my chambermaid. ' Dear Madam,' says Amy, ' what ! a'n't you with child yet ? ' ' No, Amy,' says I; ' nor any sign of it.'

" ' Law, madam ! ' says Amy, ' what have you been doing ? Why, you have been married a year and a half. I warrant you master would have got me with child twice in that time.' ' It may be so, Amy,' says I. ' Let him try, can't you ? ' ' No,' says Amy; ' you'll forbid it now. Before, I told you he should, with all my heart; but I won't now, now he's all your own.' ' Oh,' says I, ' Amy, I'll freely give you my consent. It will be nothing at all to me. Nay, I'll put you to bed to him myself one night or other, if you are willing.' ' No, madam, no,' says Amy, ' not now he's yours.' ' Why, you fool you,' says I, ' don't I tell you I'll put you to bed to him myself ? ' ' Nay, nay,' says Amy, ' if you put me to bed to him, that's another case; I believe I shall not rise again very soon.' ' I'll venture that, Amy,' says I."

The deed, which is done that night, is recounted with a freedom of frank detail, and the sequel is well studied, for the jeweller is

extremely annoyed at having been betrayed into a "vile action," while Amy

"was grievously out of sorts the next morning, and cried and took on most vehemently, that she was ruined and undone, and there was no pacifying her; she was a whore, a slut, and she was undone! undone! and cried almost all day."

Her mistress in vain tries to pacify her by pointing out that she herself is no better than Amy, but she is forced to conclude: "Well, all did not pacify Amy, but she cried two or three days about it; but it wore off by degrees."

This last sentence is one more instance of the endearing perspicacity which Defoe gave to Roxana. She knows the world, and she has no illusions about her own conduct or that of other people, about her own content in spite of outraged principle, or about the transitoriness of compunction. It is this which gives point to her reflections upon her conquest, through appeals to her vanity, by the foreign prince, and to her cheating of her conscience "with the surprising occasion, that as it was all irresistible, so it was all lawful; for that Heaven would not suffer us to be punished for that which it was not possible for us to avoid," after

the characteristic remark that, in spite of inclination, she would not go to confession in Paris since she "was a Protestant whore, and could not act as if I was Popish, upon any account whatsoever." It appears in the charming little passage where she proves to the prince that she wears no paint upon her cheeks, in her acute perception that she was "a standing mark of the weakness of great men in their vice, that value not squandering away immense wealth upon the most worthless creatures; or, to sum it up in a word, they raise the value of the object which they pretend to pitch upon by their fancy; I say, raise the value of it at their own expense"; in the remarkable passage upon the ease with which great men can have natural children; in the powerful eloquence with which she compares the lots of lawful wife and mistress; in the ingenious calculation by which she foiled the Dutch merchant's intention by giving herself to him; and in the devastating briefness of her sudden summaries of the situation, among which the following is unrivalled: "Having thus spent nine months in Holland, refused the best offer ever woman in my circumstances had, parted unkindly, and indeed barbarously, with the best friend and honestest man in the world,

got all my money in my pocket, and a bastard in my belly, I took shipping at the Brill in the packet-boat, and arrived safe at Harwich." It is even evident in her periodical fits of self-reproach, which, though Defoe inserted them for conventional reasons, are firmly based upon reality. Thus, in reflecting on her treatment by the prince and the surprising change in her fortunes, she says : " I could not but reflect upon the brutality and blindness of mankind ; that because nature had given me a good skin and some agreeable features, should suffer that beauty to be such a bait to appetite as to do such sordid, unaccountable things to obtain the possession of it."

And in describing, later on, her secret terrors, Defoe in her character describes with an amazing accuracy just the kind of terrors that these would have been :

" And let nobody conclude from the strange success I met with in all my wicked doings, and the vast estate which I had raised by it, that therefore I either was happy or easy. No, no, there was a dart struck into the liver ; there was a secret hell within, even all the while, when our joy was at the highest ; but more especially now, after it was all over, and when,

according to all appearance, I was one of the happiest women upon earth; all this while, I say, I had such constant terror upon my mind, as gave me every now and then very terrible shocks, and which made me expect something very frightful upon every accident of life. In a word, it never lightened or thundered, but I expected the next flash would penetrate my vitals, and melt the sword (soul) in this scabbard of flesh; it never blew a storm of wind, but I expected the fall of some stack of chimneys, or some part of the house, would bury me in its ruins; and so of other things."

Yet she insists that her repentance, all the while, was of a "lower kind," being simply aroused by fears of an unaccomplished vengeance.

In this tale, which it is useless to regard as a carefully proportioned artistic structure, but which appears rather as a sparkling and swiftly running stream, with depths and shallows, ripples and calm pools, the reader will not look for artful climaxes or for those cunning modes in which other writers draw together, for a moment, all the threads of their narrative. Defoe's only intention was to give the illusion of movement, and in that he supremely suc-

ceeds, whether the scene be a revelry of masked courtiers or a Quaker *ménage* in London city. Nevertheless, there is one passage in *Roxana* where the modernity of Defoe's outlook rises to a pinnacle upon which we are compelled to rest in admiration. This is the great debate between Roxana and the Dutch merchant upon the state of marriage at the time when she has parted from the prince and is making for England. The merchant had freed her from the dangerous persecutions of a rascally Jew in Paris, engineered her escape to Holland and given her introductions which had facilitated the transference of her wealth to England. They meet at Rotterdam, she all gratitude and he all admiration. It is soon clear enough to Roxana that he is in love—an attitude on his part which it was in her nature to accept very easily. He does not rush the position, and, to encourage him, she offers financial recompense for all his trouble : this, at length, brings him to the point of offering not only love but, to her surprise, marriage. It is her refusal of this offer, and her reasons, which are so remarkable and which for clearness of mind, if not for grace of diction, outdo the famous speeches of Millamant in *The Way of the World*.

Roxana's chief reason for not wishing to marry is that she is rich, though she loved the man and he loved her. Finding her inflexible, but at first without giving any reasons, the merchant conceives the plan of strengthening his claims by becoming lover first; and Roxana, with calm perspicacity, seeing his intention, relates how she gratified him in this article while it strengthened her determination against matrimony.

"I knew (she says) that, while I was a mistress, it is customary for the person kept to receive from them that keep; but, if I should be a wife, all I had then was given up to the husband, and I was thenceforth to be under his authority only; and, as I had money enough and needed not fear being what they call a cast-off mistress, so I had no need to give him twenty thousand pounds to marry me, which had been buying my lodging too dear a great deal."

However, though the merchant's project, as Roxana briefly puts it, "was a bite upon himself, while he intended it for a bite upon me," he persisted, and finally succeeded in dispelling her fixed idea that he was merely after her money. He offers not to touch one

pistole of her property, which places her, as she acutely observes, in the embarrassing position of seeming to have been ready enough to give up her virtue but not so ready to give up her money. And so, as she amazingly says, "upon the whole, I was obliged to give a new turn to it, and talk upon a kind of elevated strain, which really was not in my thoughts, at first, at all." This "elevated strain," in fact, is an impartial examination of the matrimonial state, put with a startling incisiveness.

"I told him I had, perhaps, different notions of matrimony from what the received custom had given us of it; that I thought a woman was a free agent as well as a man, and was born free, and, could she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that liberty to as much purpose as the men do: that the laws of matrimony were indeed otherwise, and mankind at this time acted quite upon other principles, and those such that a woman gave herself entirely away from herself, in marriage, and capitulated, only to be, at best, but an upper servant, and, from the time she took the man, she was no better or worse than the servant among the Israelites, who had his ears bored (that is, nailed to the

door-post), who by that act gave himself up to be a servant during life; that the very nature of the marriage contract was, in short, nothing but giving up liberty, estate, authority, and everything to the man, and the woman was indeed a mere woman ever after—that is to say, a slave.”

So far Roxana’s argument is but a statement of the law as it then stood, and she reinforces it, on her lover’s replying that where there was mutual love there could be no bondage, by an eloquent conjuring up of all the misery to which a confiding wife was liable—to be stripped of her clothes, to be turned into the street and to see her children starve. But she goes further. She insists that, in the nature of things, there is an exact equality.

“I returned, that while a woman was single, she was masculine in her politic capacity; that she then had the full command of what she had, and the full direction of what she did; that she was a man in her separate capacity, to all intents and purposes that a man could be so to himself. . . . I added, that, whoever the woman was that had an estate, and would give it up to be the slave of a great man, that woman was a fool, and must be fit for nothing

but a beggar; that it was my opinion, a woman was as fit to govern and enjoy her own estate without a man as a man was without a woman; and that, if she had a mind to gratify herself as to sexes, she might entertain a man as a man does a mistress. . . .”

Only a creative power on the level of Defoe's could have produced this woman, one who, in cant phrase, had complacently accepted the position of a man's plaything and yet proudly turns on him, with the sword of reason, when, by all accepted ideas, he is proposing to associate her with himself by more magnanimous and honest ties. And the impression of power is added to in the continuation of the debate, which is not in the least a tirade, but a close piece of fencing in which Roxana, by acknowledging to herself her own partial sophistries, appears, not as a mere mouthpiece for advanced views, but a living character. The merchant assures her that she shall be pilot, and she routs him at once with “only so long as you please.” He pleads the sacredness of matrimony and the scandal of other relations: she retorts that, not matrimony, but repentance and reform are the only salves of scandal, and she continues in a speech of some downrightness to

argue that a woman who marries the man to whom she has given herself is one who perpetuates a bad smell. Yet the extraordinary merit of the episode throughout is that the character of the merchant, in the very stage of his discomfiture, also grows in solidity and benignity. He is neither ruffled nor contentious, he pleads warmly for the claims of the child to come, and finally, with dignified honesty, refuses to treat any further as mistress the woman he desired as wife. So that, finally, for all her triumph and independence, Roxana has to show herself as, *au fond*, the victim of a perverse infatuation. She was obstinate against matrimony, yet could not bear to let the man go; and it is the man who, after all, acts with dignity and decision, by departing himself after exhausting the possibilities of tender persuasion and displaying all the highest qualities of a gentleman, while Roxana is left with her wealth, her coming child, her independence and her reflections. The few pages which contain this passage, which is astonishing both for constructive power and force of expression, set the crown upon *Roxana* for a work of art. Defoe, we must admit, though in the more modern sense he was not a novelist, wrote at least one great story which

is all but a novel; and there will not be a few, perhaps, who, after reading this brilliant narrative again, will realise the presence of a quality the restoration of which to modern fiction would be, in the highest measure, salutary and invigorating.

VI

EMMA

JANE AUSTEN's novel *Emma* was in circulation by the end of 1815 : a Quarterly Reviewer criticised it in the month which followed that of Napoleon's downfall. Napoleon's last action was fought near the Belgian village of Waterloo, and the action of Miss Austen's all but last novel is laid in the fictitious village of Highbury, sixteen miles from London, nine from Richmond and within carriage drive of Box Hill. What a contrast between two villages which the events of that year have immortalised ! Waterloo, no doubt, in itself was much like Highbury—a quiet pastoral village near a capital, with a château or two where lived the leading families, who kindly patronised the farmers, the apothecary, the schoolmistress and their like, while these in turn were looked up to by faithful domestic servants and obedient peasants. It would not be surprising to hear that there was a valetudinarian old gentleman—he might have been a count—who lived with

a handsome daughter in one of the châteaux, and that, but for the untimely intrusion of armed forces, a romance of sentiment not un-mixed with comedy would certainly have followed from the appearance at Waterloo of a neighbour's agreeable son. But the social annals of Belgian Waterloo were burnt up in the fierce flame of a fluctuating and critical battle, the event of which relieved the inhabitants of English villages from all fear of further aggression by the French Emperor; and we should be almost disgusted to be told—what is probably true—that life in Waterloo within a few months of the battle went on very much as usual, the tradesmen possibly more wealthy, the farmers possibly poorer, the gossip enriched with a few more stories, the peasants about to be enriched with many more grandchildren, and the young lady at the château very little wiser than she was before. For us English, at all events, the victory of Wellington and Blücher deprived Waterloo of any further right to a life of its own: in our imaginations we have petrified that village at its moment of supreme agitation, and in the sound of that name, as in the painting upon Keats's Grecian vase, moments of intense action are eternally suspended—the farm of Hougomont that will

never be taken, the charge of the Old Guard that will never be thrust home. And, more than that, with these three uncouth syllables a long, violent and exciting chapter of European history booms to its end. That boom re-echoed powerfully in the imaginative literature of the nineteenth century : Tolstoy, Balzac, Stendhal, Victor Hugo, Erckmann-Chatrian, Thackeray, Lever, Thomas Hardy, each in his own way made it resound again. Yet in the contemporaneous chronicle of *Highbury* there is no sound of war, not the faintest thud of a far-off gun, not the least hint of peace disturbed by a foreign enemy. Mr. Woodhouse, in his perturbation at the robbing of a neighbour's hen-roost, is induced to welcome a sturdy son-in-law with equanimity, but it occurs to nobody that young Mr. Churchill was singularly free from care and occupation while Napoleon's armies were raiding the countries of Europe. Miss Austen was looking in another direction ; her sensitive ears were strained to hear the conversation of a few individuals who lived quiet lives. She has petrified *Highbury* as effectually as we have petrified *Waterloo* ; cut off from the incidents of time it lives for ever, in the delicacy of her comedy and the ironic simplicity of her style, with *Emma* at her

fancies and Miss Bates at full flow, convulsed by the news of Mr. Elton's marriage and thrilled by the ball at the Crown.

Emma is not a story of passion or adventure. There are those upon whom, for these very deficiencies, it can never cast its spell. They cannot take much interest in life so placid and so circumscribed, in complacent minds and minute events. They want, in reading fiction, to be swept along by a wild west wind or to be shown a vaster and more thrilling world of imagination to balance the dull incompleteness of their own. Those, on the other hand, who have once fallen under the spell of Miss Austen's art will always find that spell renewed.

Emma, the favourite of some though not of all, by its peculiar sedateness prompts one to ask the secret of its perennial fascination. Certainly the temperament which requires fiction only to be adventurous or passionate or profound or ecstatic will not enjoy *Emma*. Charlotte Brontë, we know, read it "with interest and just that degree of admiration which Miss Austen herself would have thought sensible and suitable. Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works." We understand how Charlotte Brontë

felt, and respect her feelings while regretting her particular insensibility. We admit the absence from *Emma* of all that she remarks—the absence of the “stormy sisterhood” of passions and of the wildly throbbing heart. But if we speak of fascination at all, it is to claim that in judging the works of Jane Austen warmth and enthusiasm are entirely in place; as much in place as in discussing *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, if we are happy enough to have the discernment which can enjoy all three.

“Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.”

Truly the story which opens thus is a quiet story of quiet people quietly told. It is the story of a young lady who, being idle and not a little vain of her position and her superior judgment, indulged in fancies which brought distress to others and some mortification, followed by repentance, to herself. Emma fancies, first, that she can raise a girl of illegitimate birth and moderate education to her own level of refinement; that Harriet Smith is too good,

being her chosen companion, for plain Robert Martin the farmer, and that Mr. Elton, the young and self-seeking clergyman, is the girl's destined husband. Mr. Elton proposes to Emma instead, to her double annoyance, for her pride and her insight have both had a fall. She then fancies herself in love with Frank Churchill, a handsome, high-spirited young man, and easily fancies herself out again. She fancies that another young lady, Jane Fairfax, is harbouring an unfortunate attachment for a married man, and that the open-hearted Harriet Smith can succeed herself as the object of Frank Churchill's attention. But she has to learn that, all this while, Jane Fairfax has been secretly engaged to Frank Churchill, and, most disconcerting of all, that Harriet is nourishing a fancy of her own, that she has won the love of Emma's oldest and frankest friend, the middle-aged Mr. Knightley. Then is Emma's happiness wrecked indeed, when "it darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself."

But she has not long to remain in philosophic despair, for Mr. Knightley discovers his love to her, and Harriet pairs off happily with the rejected farmer. So this small village chronicle of a year, with its embroidery of pure comedy—

the nervousness of Emma's father which belies his hospitality, the torrent of Miss Bates's inconsequent chatter and the ill-breeding of vulgar Mrs. Elton—ends in wedding bells and a cease from amiable flutterings. It is a story which minutely draws the life of a small country district in which there is little movement but that of animals and little activity but that of husbandry, and neither in this movement nor that activity does the narrator take much interest. She deals with a little fragment of human society in which, for the women at least, talking, reading, making music and dancing were the only occupations, in which old friends called upon each other once a day, in which to walk half a mile alone was "unpleasant for a young lady," and in which a rich and well-born girl could be undisputed queen of her neighbourhood. There is a great deal of gentility here and not a little snobbishness; tears are allowed, but passionate sobs are not heard; riddles and charades exercise minds not troubled at all by the deep mysteries of human existence; and marriage, as the result of "regard," of "feeling" and of "attachments," is eagerly canvassed, while love is spoken of in a gingerly and sober fashion, as if it had normally the effects of a hot-water bottle

rather than those of a volcano. Miss Austen in her character of narrator speaks of "the marriage of Miss Campbell, who by that chance, that luck which so often defies anticipation in matrimonial affairs, giving attraction to what is moderate rather than to what is superior, engaged the affections of Mr. Dixon, a young man rich and agreeable, almost as soon as they were acquainted, and was eligibly and happily settled," while Emma, considering her first agreeable flutter of heart, can reflect: "Every consideration of the subject, in short, makes me thankful that my happiness is not more deeply involved. I shall do very well again after a little while, and then it will be a good thing over, for they say everybody is in love once in their lives, and I shall have been let off easily." This cool and philosophic tone is rather that of Lewis Carroll's Alice after she had emerged from swimming in the pool of her own tears with all the strange animals.

Yet, after all, if we consider in parenthesis this unenthusiastic attitude to the question of love and marriage, we may have to admit that Jane Austen has more than her own idiosyncrasy to support her. Young women of to-day may smile with superiority or shrug with contempt at Emma's early conversation with

Harriet, in which she accepts quite calmly a prospect of well-to-do singleness.

“ I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I ~~do not~~ want; consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's.”

She admits that, if there were any prospect of becoming a poor and garrulous old maid like Miss Bates, she would marry to-morrow; but is sure that she herself would never want occupation or interests.

“ If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet-work. And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is, in truth, the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be

avoided in *not* marrying, I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much to care about. There will be enough of them, in all probability, to supply every sort of sensation that declining life can need. There will be enough for every hope and every fear ; and though my attachment to none can equal that of a parent, it suits my ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder. My nephews and nieces : I shall often have a niece with me."

The admirable irony of Miss Austen in thus exposing, in a dialogue of which every exquisite stroke tells, the bland assurance of youth, will hardly escape any reader's notice ; but, making every allowance for this, I suggest that there is a remarkable frankness and justice at the bottom of Emma's remarks. We may imagine, in these days of soul-analysis, of temperaments exposed and of repressions let loose, when it is reputed both brave and fashionable to walk about in psychological nakedness without a *cache-sexe* of any kind, that we have a great advantage over the repressed and amply breeched and petticoated society of Emma's day ; but we may not often consider whether we have frankness of *thought*, if indeed our absorption

in our emotions permits us any thought to be frank about.

Young people of to-day display their glands or their libidos and button up their brains; Emma did the contrary. It was the fashion of her day, which still seems to present a very admirable appearance. The result, in this particular dialogue, is a self-revelation of peculiar directness and honesty. In spite of her delusions about her own nature, Emma, fearing no accusation of selfishness or snobbery or sour grapes, states her case in a series of brief, self-evident propositions. She was rich enough, contented enough and comfortable enough not to marry. If she were in love it would be different, it would be different if she were poor. Perfectly true. Miss Austen may have known little of the stormier passions in her own person, though quite capable of observing their effects in others, but her views upon marriage were well reflected and sensible, especially in that age.

If any error might be imputed to her it is mainly in her tendency to make her young heroines as perspicacious as she was herself. Miss Austen saw that the *great* passion of love was abnormal, but that marriage was natural, a state to be entered or rejected just as properly upon prudential as upon sentimental

considerations. In fact, she made her young women reveal with more than normal young women's directness the logical premisses and conclusions of a young woman's mind. It is only since the nineteenth century that English thought on these matters has been confused by sentiment; and the fact that this dialogue of Emma's and many others in Miss Austen's novels repels the sentimentalist is, in truth, a criticism of the sentimental attitude. She left passion on one side because it was not in her nature; thus she wisely kept her artistic balance, as may be seen in this very story, where the mutual passion of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill is sufficiently suggested but never stressed. But where social fact is in question she is relentless truth itself. In none of her novels is this more evident than in *Emma*. I cannot think of a single sentence either of description or of reflection, nor of one line in the delightful flow of dialogue, wherein, directly or by implication, there is a sign of falsity or self-delusion. Miss Austen's pen could no more tell lies than her vision.

This brief defence, however, of the attitude towards love and marriage which is reflected in *Emma* was a parenthesis. It was to parry the

ignorant thrust that no story in which the feelings were so firmly kept in hand could possibly be praised. This attitude is one of the elements of quietness in a "quiet" novel; and though the essential and justifiable enthusiasm for Jane Austen rests neither upon her sober truth nor upon the quietness of her incident, yet, just as there is a great merit in preventing feeling from obscuring fact, so there is a great deal to be said for the "quiet" view of comedy. It is temperamental, certainly, and not to be assumed at will; and it does not rise to the height of Aristophanes and Shakespeare, which is Titanic. Yet many of us, in whom the sanguine and choleric humours are not too prominent, must often feel the charm of withdrawing from the hive and watching a small corner of its life, for a moment, in detachment, and complete receptivity. Some people cannot so watch: they must moralise, as did Maeterlinck when he observed bees in a glass hive. Those, who *can*, know better than to do anything but smile, nod or shake their heads. The ordinary life of men and women, taken as a whole, is not continuously suffused by great issues or inspired by overwhelming emotions.

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attenuated, and he flashes to greatness only at moments. The supreme tragic or comic writers have to suggest the masses or isolate the moments; theirs is the highest talent. But the sensitive observer in direct detachment has neither to suggest nor to isolate; he has but to observe and, if an artist, to describe. Any corner of life, as much as any ant-heap, will reward such observation and justify an artist's description. If Miss Austen's corner of life does not interest you, you must turn away from it, but your departure does not condemn those who sit happily by her side. They do not sit there all day. Other moods will bring them back again to mix in more exciting circumstance or to be charmed by more forcible spells than these. Yet, while they are with her, they will be intently absorbed, for she will show them in her little chosen perspective the curious confusion of motive which attends all human action, the strange illusions that create imaginary obstacles, the foibles and futilities which diversify every single human being, the comedies waiting upon the satisfaction of even mild desires, the conceit which makes the most trivial existence important to itself, the absurd influence of outward circumstance. And if her ground of observation is narrow, one may

almost say of it, what she herself says in *Emma* of the view of Abbey Mill Farm as seen from Mr. Knightley's garden : " It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright without being oppressive," though one would have to add English character to make the catalogue of beauties complete.

To observe a corner of life so clearly is no mean achievement, and to describe it so exquisitely is a great one. This is what has roused enthusiasm in the hearts of several generations. Jane Austen's range is small, but her art is near perfection. To read a work of art so beautifully and economically done as *Emma* compels joy in the heart; and those who feel this joy can hardly speak of it without a happy ring in their voice. There are critics of our day who would impose upon literature the test of its being a substitute for religion, and possibly on this view Jane Austen's novels may not be held sufficiently elevating, though they are most certainly a criticism of life. But all the homilies of moralists will never persuade the admirers of Jane Austen that their admiration and affection are vainly bestowed. If they praise or value a novelist's art at all,

they must praise and value hers, for it has the beauty of an unusually acute vision perfectly expressed as art, with exquisite precision, with sympathy and with humour. As works of art her novels are complete, for in them form and content, each excellent in itself, are beautifully fused into something which is individual, inimitable and permanent.

One might linger in detail on the many felicities to be found in *Emma*, of description, of character-drawing and of language. The subject of language alone, once it were launched upon, would be difficult to leave, for here indeed Jane Austen has a magic. For instance, when Mr. Elton has proposed to Emma in the brougham, as it returned at a walking pace from Randalls to Hartfield, and each in their annoyance had rent to rags the other's complacency, she brings the scene of brisk comedy to an end with the magnificent paragraph :

“He was too angry to say another word; her manner too decided to invite supplication : and in this state of swelling resentment and mutually deep mortification, they had to continue together a few minutes longer, for the fears of Mr. Woodhouse had confined them to a foot-pace. If there had not been so much

anger, there would have been desperate awkwardness; but their straightforward emotions left no room for the little zigzags of embarrassment. Without knowing when the carriage turned into Vicarage Lane or when it stopped, they found themselves, all at once, at the door of his house; and he was out before another syllable passed. Emma then felt it indispensable to wish him a good-night. The compliment was just returned, coldly and proudly; and, under indescribable irritation of spirits, she was then conveyed to Hartfield."

The force and propriety of this passage are absolute; nothing more violent or exclamatory could produce so sure an effect upon the reader's mind. With unstrained ease the picture is placed there for ever, graven with all the power of classical eloquence; and it could be matched a hundred times in this one book. Again, if one turns from the language to the characters, what a field there is open for admiring comment! Miss Bates has become the immortal type of the golden-hearted but inconsequent gossiping spinster of a village; Mrs. Elton, with her allusions to Maple Grove, her brother-in-law's seat, and the barouche-

landau, is almost as famous a name for pert ill-breeding; while Mr. Woodhouse, with his gruel and his timorous abhorrence of novelty, is one of Miss Austen's most delicate performances, for she never lets us forget that, with all his tiresome crotchets, he has a kind heart and true gentleness of breeding. And then how neatly are Harriet Smith's vacuity of mind and John Knightley's irritability revealed in the few words that they say! Like all Miss Austen's comic characters they seem to have been born in her mind with their appropriate words in their mouths. The character of Emma has not commended itself to all readers, but for a reason which is a tribute to her creator—they feel a personal dislike for the puffed-up young woman who suffered so sadly from want of whipping. There could be no better proof of Emma's reality; and, in fact, her character is brilliantly drawn, with a power of completeness which is unsurpassed in any of Miss Austen's creations. Her merits and her stupidities are unfolded in a most ingenious fluctuating curve, and its salient points crystallised in cunning passages of dialogue which would repay a very searching analysis.

Analysis, indeed, of the kind on which Mr.

Percy Lubbock enlarges in his *Craft of Fiction* may very profitably be applied to Miss Austen's novels, and to none more so than to *Emma*. Many admirable writers have expatiated on her language and her well-known characters; and the familiarity of readers may be counted upon where those things are concerned; but not till after many readings, if then, is a reader likely to consider in detail the whole architecture of the story. The construction of *Emma*, in point of fact, is a masterpiece of finished grace in seven well-balanced movements which vary in length and in *tempo*, but follow one another in a harmonious succession of stresses and relaxations which it is most interesting to follow. It is hardly necessary, I hope, to repudiate any suggestion that Miss Austen devised the framework first and then fitted the story to it; that is not how gifted artists compose masterpieces. No, the interest of laying the framework bare is simply to show with what instinctive grace the creator of *Emma* proceeded to produce a work of such admirable proportions.

The first movement, which is the longest, takes in the first seventeen chapters. An introduction written with brisk incisiveness gives us Emma and Mr. Woodhouse left alone at Hartfield on the marriage of Miss Taylor, Emma's

governess and friend, a preliminary sketch of their characters, a brief account of the amiable Mr. Weston who had married Miss Taylor and taken her to live half a mile off, a first view of Mr. Knightley's good sense and Emma's flightiness on the subject of match-making, a glimpse of Mr. Elton's position as a "pretty young man," and a slight survey of the limited society, including the Bateses, which could be relied upon to make up for the absence of Miss Taylor in the evenings. Having crammed an astonishing amount into sixteen pages, Miss Austen launches into the movement proper with Mrs. Goddard's request to introduce Miss Harriet Smith, and the words: "Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of somebody." The wings of Emma's vanity are at once at full stretch in the pursuit of the first of those fancies which bring her successively to grief—the fancy that she can improve at once the mind and the lot of the pretty but brainless Harriet. In words that make us blush hotly for her she covers the excellent farmer Martin with contempt and begins scheming for the match of Harriet and Mr. Elton. After a pause in Chapter V, in which the discussion by Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston of Emma's faults and virtues enlarges our knowledge of her

character, all the comedy of Emma's deception of herself, Harriet and the affected clergyman rapidly proceeds with the episodes of her taking Harriet's protrait and of the charade, the blind assurance of her self-satisfied argument with Mr. Knightley, and the meeting with Mr. Elton in Vicarage Lane, which enables Emma to show a new virtue—an intelligent sympathy in charity—and a new foible—her assumption of immunity from love and marriage. These lead, through an interlude of pure amusement furnished by the arrival of the John Knightleys at Hartfield and Mr. Woodhouse's plaintive reprobations of his other daughter's rashness in taking her family to the seaside in the summer, to the great scene in which this movement culminates—the dinner-party at the Westons'. For scenes of this kind Miss Austen marshals all her characters with a peculiar vigour of her own; they take light from one another and contrive by their interactions—often of dialogue alone—to set up an atmosphere of excitement proper for enactment of a cardinal incident. This dinner-party, which from beginning to end occupies three chapters, prepares us beautifully between its preparation and its conclusion—what with Emma's surprise at Mr. Elton's apparently callous behaviour,

Mr. John Knightley's grumbles, Frank Churchill's letter, the excitement of his prospective arrival, and the fuss and bustle over the trifling snowstorm—for the triumphant stroke of Mr. Elton's declaration to Emma and their mutual discomfiture in the crawling carriage. There is nothing left but for the movement to be rapidly concluded with Emma's depressed reflections, her buoyant recovery and the departure of Mr. Elton for Bath.

The second movement is less rapid, but excellently contrived. Emma's first fancy has been dissipated in anger and self-reproach. A second fancy has been shown hovering—her assumption of a special relation to Frank Churchill when he shall appear—and a third fancy is about to be aired. But Emma is first allowed to reinstate herself somewhat in the reader's opinion by her good-humoured defence of Frank Churchill in conversation with Mr. Knightley. The older man, from unconscious jealousy, is harsh and petulant, while Emma, without disrespect, tries to soften his prejudice and laugh away his annoyance. Thereupon Miss Bates comes full on to the scene with her inimitable conversation and the letters from her niece Jane Fairfax, the reasons for whose

appearance at Hartfield encourage the third of Emma's fancies—that this reserved young woman is harbouring an unhappy love for a married man. A short pause for the purpose of enlarging on Jane's past history and Emma's reluctance to befriend her leads to the announcement by Miss Bates of Mr. Elton's engagement, Harriet's perturbation thereat and the embarrassment of her meeting with the Martins at Ford's shop. The last chapter of this movement makes Emma once again odious for her part in Harriet's want of good manners to the Martins, and introduces Frank Churchill, handsome, provocative, and eminently ready to meet Emma half-way in a flirtation.

The third movement is short and sparkling. It is amusing to note how skilfully Jane Austen suggests the excitement aroused by Frank Churchill's presence among the ladies of Highbury by quickening the *tempo* when he is on the stage. In this movement Emma and he execute, one might say, a *pas de deux* of triumphant spirits before an admiring company of Westons and Bateses. There is first the walk in the village, the examination of the Crown's ballroom, the project of a dance, and Frank's first discussion of Jane with Emma, in which he maliciously encourages her fancied reading of

Jane's heart. The episode of Frank's visit to London, ostensibly to get his hair cut, leads to the dinner-party at the Coles', where everything goes *con brio* to the tune of Jane's new piano and conjectures about its donor. In the bright play of Miss Austen's irony Emma's fatuous self-confidence, though never rendered mean or contemptible, is here shown in full blossom. Frank fools her about Jane to the top of her bent, and by the time the ladies have reached the drawing-room her state of vanity is ripe for disaster. She preens herself—in an exquisite paragraph—on the appearance and happiness of her protégée—Harriet—and blandly proceeds in conversation with Mrs. Weston to lay it down that Mr. Knightley must never marry; yet all this is but a prelude to the two succeeding chapters of brilliant comedy that describe the meeting of Miss Bates with the company from Hartfield, her soliloquies on Jane's piano and the broken rivet in her mother's spectacles, the congregation of the company in the Bates's sitting-room, Frank's facetiousness calculated to mislead Emma and secretly please Jane, and the exchanges of Miss Bates out of the window with Mr. Knightley on his horse. How Miss Austen must have enjoyed writing this wonderful climax of her

scherzo ! She closes it with the preparations for the ball, Mr. Weston's whisper to his wife : " He has asked her, my dear," and the cadence of sudden suspense brought about by Frank's abrupt departure and his mysterious agitation on taking leave of Emma. She is left alone embroidering the theme of her second fancy into a singularly unimpassioned love-motive.

The fourth movement of *Emma* is a pause in the main action. At its opening Emma is seen alone, pondering the state of her heart, and Frank Churchill's, and at its close she is again alone, still pondering but with a change. She has fancied herself into love with Frank and quickly out of it again ; she has fancied Frank into love with herself, a more passionate sentiment, but one which would admit of a gentle cooling with no loss of friendship, and she had begun to nourish a new and more dangerous fancy—her fourth—that she may adroitly bestow on Harriet the place in Frank's heart which she herself had so coolly resigned. Meanwhile Mr. Elton has brought home his bride, and it is Mrs. Elton who takes the centre of the stage with the broader comedy of her vulgarity. This ridiculous character is given full play, and its exhibition culminates

delightfully at the dinner-party at Hartfield, in three chapters, where she patronises Jane, actually calls Mr. Woodhouse her "dear old beau," and engages in that wonderful conversational duet with Mr. Weston wherein each continually interrupts the other's favourite theme, his being the merits of his son Frank, hers the glories of her brother-in-law.

The fifth movement is all action: Frank Churchill has returned and events are moving fast to conclusions. Though only six chapters long, it is the most tremendous, for it represents the turning round of the fates upon the offending Emma. This movement opens immediately with pomp and trumpets—the ball at the Crown. Though this is one of Miss Austen's masterpieces of description, it is too well known to be enlarged upon. The dance music has hardly died away before Harriet appears fainting upon Frank Churchill's arm after her encounter with the gipsies. Emma's fourth fancy bursts into insolent growth, and is encouraged in the comedy of Harriet's confession of a new attachment and Emma's misunderstanding of her supposed confidence. Then clouds begin to gather. There is Frank's "blunder" in alluding to Mr. Perry's carriage and Mr. Knightley's irritation at detecting an

understanding between Frank and Jane; there is the sultriness of the strawberry feast at Donwell, Jane's distressed escape and Frank's ill-temper; and, at last, the great and famous finale of the picnic on Box Hill, where Emma gives herself her last airs, is rude to Miss Bates, is scolded by Mr. Knightley, and drives home feeling her first tears running down her cheeks "without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were."

The sixth movement, though a little overburdened by the clearing up of the relations between Jane and Frank, completes the melancholy march of the furies upon Emma. Frank's marriage to Jane, she imagines, can cause her no personal pain, but only annoyance at having once more to confess her stupidity to Harriet. At once and by the hand of the submissive Harriet she is dealt the full and final buffet: it is a magnificent effect. Harriet, the patronised, is confident that Mr. Knightley has an interesting sentiment for her. Emma can neither discourage nor disbelieve this overwhelming confidence. She is abased to the ground, and is left by the end of Chapter XLVIII in an attitude of complete dejection, repenting of all her follies and reflecting on the grim bleakness of her future. "Hartfield

must be comparatively deserted, and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined happiness." The Westons would be wrapped up in their child, Frank Churchill would carry away Jane Fairfax, and Mr. Knightley, their friend of all hours, would be lost for ever for the sake of the Harriet she had so unwisely pampered. It had been all her own work :

"And the only source whence anything like consolation or composure could be drawn was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone."

To these dull moaning chords succeeds the last and seventh movement, agitated at first and calming down to a serene resolution of all the discords. Its climax comes at its opening. Almost without preparation, despair is turned into rapture by Mr. Knightley's unexpectedly provoked declaration in the shrubbery. After this, all is a gradual falling away into repose. Frank's long letter, Mr. Knightley's comments

on it, Mrs. Elton's last vulgarities and the happy decline of Harriet into Robert Martin's arms lead to the descent of peace upon Emma and upon Highbury, and, after a last flash of fun at the expense of Mr. Woodhouse, the heroine walks out of church and out of the story as the happy Mrs. Knightley.

Perhaps, after trying in this manner to hold for a moment in one's mind the whole structure of this work of art, the clue to Miss Austen's perennial fascination is easier to discern. She has a mastery of vital rhythm, not only in her sentences, but in the whole fabric of her creations. With subtle variations, climax answers climax and repose balances repose. No two movements are alike, but all are bound together by a natural affinity, like the movements of Purcell's Golden Sonata; and within their limits all the moods, all the graces and all the less boisterous humours have their diverting play and interchange. As in an opera by Mozart, one bewitching theme succeeds another; our enjoyment is never strained but never relaxed. By ingenious yet easy alternations of key and measure, of piquant solos and triumphant *tutti*, our consciousness is held continuously enthralled, until the last chord has been struck. We return again, when the

element of surprise is quite worn away, and again we are subjugated. It is no wonder that, having once surrendered to this enchantress, we are always in her power, listening to such bright and graceful music, so pure in form, so delicate in texture.

VII

ADAM BEDE

I FIND it difficult to imagine the reader to whom *Adam Bede* could be anything but an enchantment. There is an obvious excuse for one who is mystified by George Meredith or for a Charlotte Brontë's cold appreciation of Jane Austen, but this work of George Eliot's surely has an appeal to every side of the collective mind which finds any pleasure at all in fiction, while there is no hindrance in it—no idiosyncrasy of style or unpalatableness of matter—to the immediate working of that appeal. Humanly speaking, it is a perfect novel; even, if I may say so, a perfect popular novel. There is nothing derogatory in calling it "popular," for that epithet has only taken on its doubtful quality through the imperfections apparent in the work of so many admittedly popular novelists, who fail in comparison with standards set up, not by critics, but by the work of greater novelists.

Tom Jones is popular; *David Copperfield* is popular; and both are great works of art. The mystery is that so many people, both writers and readers, can apparently be equally satisfied by inferior work, with these great examples of the best before them. The solution, probably, is that the supply of great art is immeasurably less than the supply of human enthusiasm.

Adam Bede, at all events, shows how all the elements of a typically popular novel can be combined in a perfect work of art. It is a story of everyday life brought before everyday men and women. No sophistication of intellect or special sharpening of artistic perception is called upon to follow its development. The scene, the characters and the incidents are all familiar: the evocation of the English countryside, the portraits of gentlefolk and rustics and the simple plot itself must arouse in every mind memories of similar things, heard, seen or experienced. Moreover, this everyday life, though it has the simplicity of a bygone century, is presented as life presents itself at all times to ordinary eyes—not as a cunningly prepared situation, not as a series of detached reflections, still less as a flux of subconscious reactions, but as that curious mixture of comedy and tragedy, of humour and pathos, love and joy and sorrow

into which we step every morning as we leave our beds. That is one element of popularity; another is the construction of its plot.

Adam Bede is what publishers call a "strong" love story. Adam's love for Hetty, Hetty's seduction by the gentleman, Arthur Donnithorne, her piteous wandering in search of her seducer, her tragic fate, the suspense of her trial, the eleventh-hour pardon, Arthur's remorse and the completely happy union of Adam to Dinah Morris in the end are things which command a universal sympathy and emotion. Not all life is tragic, but this tragedy is one of the commonest possibilities of our experience; and one of the charms of imaginative art is that it gives life in us to our latent possibilities, at once enriching and unburdening us. 'Not all tragedy is so orderly, but the function of art is this very ordering, so as to purify our confused emotions and rid them of the irrelevant. The tragic force and pathos of *Adam Bede*, never degenerating into the lachrymose or the sentimental, are undeniable elements in its perfection. And then, alongside of tragedy, as it must ever be in England, to emphasise both its sting and its momentariness, comes a frank but unstrained humour which is diffused through the whole book, irradiating

it—chiefly from that focus of humour, the Hall Farm—from beginning to end.

Life, a familiar setting, love, tragedy, pathos, humour, these are the fundamentals, but more is added to complete the structure. First, a vigorous and supple power of characterisation which gives us the figures of Adam and Seth, Mrs. Poyser and old Lisbeth, Dinah and Hetty, Parson Irwine and Arthur, in such striking relief that they remain fixed in our memories as individuals. Secondly, the sensitiveness to beauty, both physical and moral, which inspired those passages describing the country's face transformed by the seasons and the beautiful scenes of which Dinah is the radiant centre, so simply yet so eloquently as to charm even the most earthly soul and to focus all those vague aspirations to beauty which lurk even in commonplace minds. Lastly, there is a mighty and unconcealed moral conviction which takes and holds up the whole thing, in all its beauty and all its tragedy, as an example, a warning to sinners and an encouragement to virtue. Moral weakness leads to disaster, the performance of duty to satisfaction, thoughtless pleasure-seeking to remorse, humble virtue to a rich reward—to point out these truths George Eliot gathers herself up, at

telling moments, with an impressive solemnity. The irreverent may laugh and the careless may sneer, but it remains a truth that the depiction of life to an audience is incomplete without a moral insistence. It may be an elementary morality, but so far as the art has been good the morality will be true, for the moment at least, if not for every generation. The morality of *Adam Bede*, albeit of a certain severity, is the inevitable and appropriate frame for George Eliot's picture, giving salience to its beauties and a final unity to its diversity. What, then, can any popular novel show that is not to be found in *Adam Bede*, and in what element of wide appeal can *Adam Bede* be found deficient?

It would be a strange thing, then, if *Adam Bede* were no longer popular. Professor Saintsbury, an admirable judge, has expressed the opinion, somewhere in his "Notebooks," that Thackeray has never lost his popularity simply because he was never popular. It may be true that the natures which particularly appreciate Thackeray's art are comparatively rare : not so the natures to which *Adam Bede* appeals. Yet, though *Adam Bede* is a better novel than many, though not than all, of Thackeray's, I have an uneasy feeling that

in these later days it has lost the popularity that it possessed and deserved. One cannot be sure of these things, though booksellers and publishers may throw some light on them; but there is a sad irony in the possibility that, on the score of George Eliot's secure reputation and perhaps on the score of *Daniel Deronda* too, *Adam Bede* has taken on the forbidding appearance of a "classic" and ceased to delight, as it should, the whole of each succeeding generation. It is a dreadful fate for a moving and entertaining story to become a classic, or is it not, perhaps, more dreadful still that to us English a classic should appear forbidding? But so it does, whether "a classic" or "the classic" be in question; and nothing appears more forbidding than classic tragedy.

Adam Bede is far from being a work of classic art; its contours, its decorations and, above all, its humour are most agreeably romantic. Nevertheless—to follow out a train of reflection—there is a classic element in it, and if anyone were to call this particular instance of the classic forbidding, I should not say him nay. The tragedy of Hetty is classic, not in its circumstances, which are simply commonplace,

but in the form of its presentation. In presenting all the other characters and incidents in the book George Eliot takes the romantic line: the sturdiness of Adam, the loving tenderness of Dinah, the humorous arabesques of Mrs. Poyser and the worldly charity of Parson Irwine are things not working under iron conditions, but independent, drawn from the free consciousness, wayward even. These characters are given to us simply as individuals, with the author's approbation, indulgence or sympathy. Hetty, on the other hand, is presented, not as an individual freely developing, but as an example of moral process, like some unfortunate character of Greek tragedy involved in the workings of immutable law. And her creator, fully approving this law of pains and penalties, the law of Puritan morality, uses no indulgence or sympathy in bringing her before us. A gloomy foreboding and a horror-stricken pity, akin to those of a typical Greek chorus, take the place of these emotions.

The only redeeming quality which her creator allows Hetty is great physical beauty, yet even this indulgence seems to exasperate her; and here she shows less wisdom than the Greeks, who, in all the rigidity of their con-

ception of Nemesis, never looked for the root of evil in perfection. All perfection demands reverence, and that human beauty is a form of perfection the Greeks realised when they absolved Helen, "destroyer of ships and destroyer of cities," from any moral blame or divine penalty. That truth has always been hidden from Puritanism, to which fleshly beauty appears as a snare of the devil. George Eliot, with her sensitiveness to all beauty and her rather masculine mind, could not honestly take up so absolute an attitude, but her very uneasiness and exasperation over Hetty's beauty betray her fundamental adhesion to the middle-class morality of her day. See her introduction of Hetty, coquettishly making butter in Mrs. Poyser's dairy under the admiring eyes of Arthur Donnithorne :

" There are various orders of beauty, causing men to make fools of themselves in various styles, from the desperate to the sheepish; but there is one order of beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women. It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning

to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief—a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you. Hetty Sorrel's was that sort of beauty."

Even her similes show George Eliot's exasperation, for, as she knew well enough, kittens, ducklings and babies do not attract men. She is wrestling with the real truth that Hetty was a beautiful *woman*, and the truth overcomes her, since she goes on more frankly to detail Hetty's rose-petal cheeks, her large dark eyes, her white shell-like ears and the curves of her limbs. "Hetty's was a spring-tide beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you with a false air of innocence." How typical are those last four words, and how they reveal the Puritan spirit! There is nothing false in young animals, but there *is* falsity in the assumption that innocence means nothing but a disposition to do what righteous people consider harmless. George Eliot was a righteous person spoiled by intense æsthetic sensibility; and when the æsthetic got the upper hand, as it did when it was allowed to describe with pagan delight

Hetty posturing before her looking-glass in petticoat and stays, with the old black lace scarf round her shoulders, equilibrium had to be regained by some sarcastic reflections on the stupidity of supposing that beauty goes with goodness, and by pointedly contrasting the spirituality of Dinah with the peevish and shallow self-love of the lovely girl.

George Eliot, of course, had an awkward inkling of the truth that even in purely physical beauty there is something spiritually valuable and uplifting, and her Puritanism, horrified at such backsliding, was forced to load the scales against Hetty and present her as a nature devoid of any redeeming spirituality—hard, selfish, vain and empty, no better than a canary-bird. And nothing is a stronger proof of her Puritanism than that she should have been driven thus to break a canary-bird upon the wheel of moral retribution. When she observes Hetty examining her earrings while dressing for the dinner at the Chase, she harps insistently upon Hetty's want of all warm feelings.

“Perhaps water-nixies, and such lovely things without souls, have these little round holes in their ears by nature, ready to hang

jewels in. And Hetty must be one of them : it is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman's destiny before her—a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment, changing all at once her fluttering, trivial, butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish."

And so again, when Hetty has read her lover's letter of farewell in a dumb despair described with masterly precision—for George Eliot never falsified psychology—we have to be assured that "here was a luxurious and vain nature, not a passionate one"; and later in the same chapter, when the idea of marrying Adam enters Hetty's head, George Eliot exclaims :

"Yes, the actions of a little trivial soul like Hetty's, struggling amidst the serious, sad destinies of a human being *are* strange. So are the motions of a little vessel without ballast tossed about on a stormy sea. How pretty it looked with its parti-coloured sail in the sunlight, moored in the quiet bay !

" ' Let that man bear the loss who loosed it from its moorings.'

“ But that will not save the vessel—the pretty thing that might have been a lasting joy.”

And so, when George Eliot comes to relate poor Hetty's desperate journey in search of Arthur, her despair, her agonised thought of suicide, the crazed murder of her child, her trial and condemnation, she does so with immense tragic power and a horrified pity, but never with sympathy. She stands aloof till Adam appears upon the scene, broken with grief, and for *his* agony her sympathy immediately overflows, even to the extent of letting his emotion adjust the balance of her own coldness. Through the feelings of Adam himself and of Dinah Morris we are given a juster appreciation of Hetty's tragedy than by her direct narrative.

“ Dinah, do you think God will take away that crying and the place in the wood, now I've told everything? ”

These last words of Hetty's confession express a higher humanity, and bring the tears to our eyes which all the previous description, vivid though it is, of Hetty's *via dolorosa* had kept dry.

Only the acceptance of an iron moral law

and a belief that sin, in whatever extenuating circumstances, is a deadly thing only to be pardoned by God can really justify the tremendous condemnation which, throughout *Adam Bede*, is laid on Hetty Sorrel. Reviewing her story as George Eliot tells it, one sees that Hetty's vanity, day-dreams and indifference were no worse than those of many nubile girls—that she was a lovely little fool carried off her feet, too ignorant to be wicked, too simple to deceive. If she had been imagined as some Undine who gained a human soul at the price of suffering, there would have been more point in all the insistence on her insensibility. As it is, she is given no chance: she is already doomed in the dairy, to be an awful warning of beauty's danger, since beauty encourages vanity and fleshly leanings which lead down a steep slope to utter destruction and, short of repentance, to eternal damnation.

No doubt, in these days, we glorify or sentimentalise too much the urge of sexual impulses. One can imagine Hetty's story treated with a morbid sensuality or a sickly pathos by certain authors of to-day. Yet our revolt to the other extreme is not surprising when we read the fifth book of *Adam Bede*. Not for a moment is the author herself revolted by the possibility

that a simple ignorant creature can be condemned to death for having in a frenzy of despair left the fruit of her unhappy love to perish in a field, or that, being reprieved, she may die a wretched convict in a convict settlement. She does not conceive the sufferings and the agony that she so powerfully describes as things to be set in the scale against the outrage of a narrow ethical code, the awful pomp of legal vengeance and the wrath of God. Hetty, in her depths is simply—

“poor wandering Hetty, with the rounded childish face, and the hard, unloving, despairing soul looking out of it—with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts, no room in them for any sorrows but her own, and tasting that sorrow with the more intense bitterness! My heart bleeds for her as I see her toiling along on her weary feet, or seated in a cart, with her eyes fixed vacantly on the road before her, never thinking or caring whither it tends, till hunger comes and makes her desire that a village may be near. What will be the end?—the end of her objectless wandering, apart from all love, caring for human beings only through her pride, clinging to life only as the hunted wounded brute clings to it?

“ God preserve you and me from being the beginners of such misery ! ”

For this kind of heart-bleeding there is not very much to be said : it is only a sort of reflex sensation like the tingling in the soles of one's feet that follows the mental image of falling down a precipice. Because Hetty, a victim of man and of circumstance, was devoid of grace, she was out of the reach of true fellow-feeling : it was right that she should be a scapegoat for the warning of “ you and me.” That last ejaculation is certainly classic in form, but morally how Puritanic ! A Greek chorus would have simply prayed to be delivered from similar misfortune. And it is the moral attitude, in the long run, not the classic treatment which in Hetty's part of *Adam Bede* we now find forbidding. It is the reflection of a particular age, not of human *truth*. Indeed, there is more human truth in George Moore's *Esther Waters*, a book which would have outraged George Eliot.

This line of thought, however, belongs to the history of morals rather than to the criticism of art. The treatment of Hetty is no imperfection in *Adam Bede*, for art must always reflect the moral consciousness of its day,

whether directly or by contrast. George Eliot's art reflected it directly; indeed, in many ways, she purified it, purged it of hypocrisy and drew much beauty from it. Her spirited defence of easy-going Mr. Irwine is an instance of her contempt for mere sectarianism; and in page after page one can pick out passages directed against a doctrinaire asceticism. What else are the long discourse in Chapter XVII on tolerance and human kindness, or the evocation in Chapter LII of "Old Leisure" who "never went to Exeter Hall, or heard a popular preacher, or read *Tracts for the Times* or *Sartor Resartus*"? What else her sweet and humorous description of the Sunday service with its plain sermon and Joshua Rann's reading "like the lingering vibrations of a fine violoncello"? What else the beautiful celebration in Chapter XIX of old village worthies of Adam's type? What else the accounts of junketing at the Chase and of the Harvest Supper? What else those unforgettable surrenderings to delight of the eye—the immortal pictures of Nature inexhaustibly lovely at every change of the seasons?

"He saw . . . a foreground which was just as lovely—the level sunlight lying like transparent gold among the gently-curving stems

of the feathered grass and tall red sorrel, and the white umbels of the hemlocks lining the bushy hedgerows. It was that moment in summer when the sound of the scythe being whetted makes us cast more lingering looks at the flower-sprinkled tresses of the meadows."

Or again :

"You might have known it was Sunday if you had only waked up in the farmyard. . . . The sunshine seemed to call all things to rest and not to labour; it was asleep itself on the moss-grown cow-shed; on the group of white ducks nestling together with their bills tucked under their wings; on the old black sow stretched languidly on the straw, while her largest young one found an excellent spring bed on her mother's fat ribs; on Alick, the shepherd, in his new smock-frock, taking an uneasy siesta, half-sitting, half-standing on the granary steps."

The description of the Hall Farm's garden, the evocation of midsummer at the opening of the third book, or of the "merry day" in August which opens the fourth—one could piece out a whole anthology of these lovely passages. The beauty, not only of nature and physical form, but of all common human life played on

George Eliot's heart, and she could not help expressing it. Over and over again, in her fond depiction of the Hall Farm and old Lisbeth's cottage, of Bartle Massey's night school, of the gathering at church, and the preaching on the Green she bore witness to "that other beauty which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy," and which inspired the old Dutch painters, "who see beauty in commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them."

The same delight was certainly George Eliot's, so that, in a manner, her attitude to Hetty is all the more surprising. One can only observe the fact that, under her moral code, certain transgressions blotted out the light of heaven entirely. Yet even to this there is another side. If the fault of Puritanism is narrowness, its virtue is strength of character. The remarkable power of Adam Bede himself is drawn from the same spiritual source as Hetty's reprobation. In Adam we have an Ironside—no canter, it is true, but a hard, immensely strong nature, of unflinching rectitude, set towards duty as immovably as the compass-needle to the north, more capable of passion than of tenderness, long-suffering rather

than gentle. George Eliot, while seizing with wonderful art all his salient points and expressing them in speeches which are masterpieces of characterisation, makes him always admirable and always sympathetic. The soft and gentle Seth—a character also beautiful in its truth—seems a poor thing beside him. And I think that, with all reverence to the vivifying art of his creator, our appreciation of Adam Bede proves how ineradicably Puritanism, for good and ill, has become part of the English blood and bone. An Englishman, in his deepest instinct, feels with Adam all the time, in his masterfulness, in his close concentration upon few and obvious things, in his exasperation with his fretful mother, in the hardness of his reasoning where material facts were concerned and his incurious acceptance of immaterial tradition, in his mixture of conscious superiority to his fellows and ingrained respect for his “betters,” in his timidity and obtuseness with women, in his anger and in his indignant misery. He is behind Adam’s fist striking Arthur to the ground and in Adam’s annoyance when Hetty sticks the rose in her hair. Seldom has a man been so completely and accurately drawn by a woman as Adam Bede by George Eliot, and he is one of the types upon which, since the

Reformation, all Englishmen have been formed. It will be a bad day for England if that type, a slow fire of hard ashes, needing a strong bellows to kindle its brightness, is ever suffered to burn out.

Even the humour of *Adam Bede*, which is one of its most precious qualities, is not the Shakespearean humour, which surveys the whole world in a mood of triumphant playfulness. That, too, has undergone its Puritan transformation. Mrs. Poyser's racy speech is exquisite in its appropriateness, but the mind which it reflects is restrictive and sententious. Bartle Massey was right in finding her a sour apple with a sound core. She is as ready to nip exuberance with a sharp peck as to check complaint. At bottom hers is a stony philosophy of work and resignation in a world where, in her view, it was sinful to repine at one's lot and foolish, if not wrong, to be complacent. What makes her so delightful is the vivacity of her comment and the aptness of her similes. Her lines are all perfect.

“ ‘Eh, it's a poor look-out when th' ould foulks doesna like the young uns,' said old Martin. . . .

“ ‘Ay, it's like livin' in a hen-roost for them

as doesn't like fleas,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'We've all had our turn at bein' young, I reckon, be't good or ill.' "

These retorts are what give Mrs. Poyser her inexhaustible charm and conceal the fact that as a figure in the drama she is almost wholly ornamental.

She is static herself, and has no effect on others; on the other hand, she is invaluable as a reflection of what is going on. The angle of Mrs. Poyser's vision and the tang of her tongue point every turn of the action up to the tragic climax, which goes too deep for them. Nevertheless, she is less interesting and less complete as a character than old Lisbeth Bede, who has a dramatic as well as an æsthetic importance. What a work of art she is, this old woman, "clean as a snowdrop," with spines of care in her heart and no hard philosophy to soothe their smart; just an old rustic woman with her memories, her small but absorbing cares, her tactless motherliness, and her acuteness of vision where her sons are concerned! Old Lisbeth's speeches have all the humour of Mrs. Poyser's, but there was added to the framing of them a "deep, human sympathy" which the mistress of the Hall

Farm did not require. No passage in the book exceeds in delicacy the description of old Lisbeth sitting worn-out in her disordered kitchen, after performing her last duties to her husband's corpse, of her lamentations to Adam and her comforting by Dinah, unless it be that chapter near the close where the old woman blurts out to Seth and Adam that Dinah loves Adam, as any woman could tell. There is beauty and life in the character of Lisbeth Bede, besides the humour of her canny speech and peevish heart; and for that I give her preference over Mrs. Poyser, who scolded much but felt little. Mrs. Poyser, who truly appreciated Dinah's goodness, for all her matronly annoyance at her niece's Methodism, never rose to the pitch of old Lisbeth's simple speech when Dinah offered to spend the night with her.

“ Well, there's room; I'n got my bed laid i' th' little room o'er the back kitchen, and ye can lie beside me. I'd be glad to ha' ye wi' me to speak to i' th' night, for ye've got a nice way o' talkin'. It puts me i' mind o' the swallows as was under the thack last 'ear, when they fust begun to sing low an' soft-like i' th' mornin'. Eh, but my old man war fond o' them birds! an' so war Adam, but they'n

ne'er comed again this 'ear. Happen *they're* dead too."

The character of Dinah Morris is a creation of extraordinary beauty. We know that it was founded upon a memory of a beloved relative, but the creation, nevertheless, remains George Eliot's achievement. Nothing is more remarkable than the manner in which the story reflects that inward illumination which such a nature as Dinah's inevitably sheds upon all its surroundings. When Dinah is there an ethereal light suffuses everything, and when she is absent it is as if a veil had passed over the sun. From her very first appearance, as she mounts the cart to preach her unpretentious but impassioned sermon on the village green, we are fascinated, like the stranger in the book who checked his horse to listen for an hour. Her tender speeches to Seth which tell of her vocation, her unassuming account to Mr. Irwine of the day when the spirit first came on her to comfort lowly and afflicted hearts, her ministrations to poor mourning Lisbeth, the picture of her rapt in contemplation at her window while Hetty was preening herself in the next room, her beautiful letter to Seth which is like a gleam of sun before a great storm, and her

arrival, like a celestial spirit, at the prison to unlock, not material gates, but the bars of misery that shut in a human soul—these are things that shine out of *Adam Bede* with a radiance which no change of fashion can dim.

That Dinah was a Methodist is but an outward circumstance : her particular creed is intrinsically of no importance. And as for morality, one could hardly say that she had any. As a character she stands on a level of goodness far above the rest, and yet as applied to her pure spirit morality is a word empty of meaning. Formally the sect to which she belonged was intensely Puritan, yet, even when the flaunting earrings of Chad's Bess moved her compassion, she stood on a height above all formal precept. She points the difference between morality and religion. In Dinah Morris, with an exquisite fidelity and sensibility, George Eliot has drawn one of those rare and chosen souls who, in the truest sense, are religious, and whose awareness of God changes the appearance of all mortal things.

“ Ah, that is a blessed time, isn't it, Seth, when the outward light is fading, and the body is a little wearied with its work and its labour? Then the inward light shines the brighter, and we have a deeper sense of resting on the Divine

strength. I sit on my chair in the dark room and close my eyes, and it is as if I was out of the body and could feel no want for ever more."

These words and all that follow them in Dinah's letter to Seth, as well as the picture of her praying in solitude—

"She closed her eyes, that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky. That was often Dinah's mode of praying in solitude. Simply to close her eyes and to feel herself enclosed by the Divine Presence; then gradually her fears, her yearning anxieties for others, melted away like ice crystals in a warm ocean——"

show that George Eliot realised the kind of truth which illuminated Dinah's heart—the truth which in various colours, but with the same splendour, has come to all great contemplative spirits. And her merit, as an artist, is that she realised this perfectly in a concrete form. To have written the two passages just quoted might possibly have borne witness to little more than an intellectual appreciation of the contemplative process, of the mystical method, in fine; but Dinah's actions, her lovely, gentle words, and her absolute natural-

ness, devoid of all demureness or saintly mien or ecstatic pride, could only have been imagined by one whose creative impulse rested upon intuitions of a similar deepness. If there is any flaw in the presentation of Dinah it can only be that, in the end, she is made to marry Adam, to become the child-bearing wife of a hard-working man. Not that the change is incredible, but that it betokens a partial darkening of what was light before. George Eliot was sensible of this when she saw that Dinah would hesitate and struggle before yielding to a human inclination. She yielded because her heart was invaded by a mortal love, and it was "but a divided life" that she lived without Adam. No one can deny that it is a descent from glory. We do not find it easy, having loved Dinah Morris, to imagine Dinah Bede. Fortunately, it being the privilege of art to stop where it pleases, we are hardly required to do so. We only see her for a brief moment, her two children beside her, welcoming Adam on his return from seeing Arthur Donnithorne again; and her last words remain with us as a promise that, if her light was dimmed, she was no less lovable :

"Come in, Adam, and rest; it has been a hard day for thee."

VIII

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

IN the British Museum's Catalogue the name of Samuel Butler, author of *Erewhon* and many other books, is followed by the descriptive words "philosophical writer." Butler himself would not, I think, have quarrelled with this title (and indeed he must have known about it in his lifetime), though at various moments in his career he essayed the activities of sheep-farmer, painter, novelist, musical composer and poet, not without success. Any study of his work as a whole would have to conform to this general directive, since right-thinking, the aim of philosophy, was certainly Butler's aim from first to last; and from this point of view his novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, falls into its place beside *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited*, as one among many expressions of his views about religious truth, human morality and the nature and effect of biological evolution in human beings. *The Way of All Flesh*, as Mr. Festing Jones has shown in his admirable and

exhaustive *Life of Samuel Butler*, is also a very important autobiographical document.

Of Butler the man, however, there is nothing left to be said. Owing to the marked personal tinge which he gave to all his writing, and thanks to his having had an ideal biographer, anybody who cares to do so can form a tolerably complete image of that strange but strong character and that charming but difficult personality. Yet *The Way of All Flesh* is also a great novel, which, like all great things, once they are born, has taken on an independent life of its own, without ceasing to be all the other things that it is—a prolongation of Butler's terrestrial existence, a biographical document and an expression of his philosophy. As a work of imaginative art, taking its place in the line of really important English novels, it insists on being observed from an angle at which Butler's purely speculative and argumentative work falls into shadow, and the two *Erewhons*—which stand out boldly enough to the student of moral satire and philosophical fiction—become but minor eminences. It is worth lingering at the point from which Butler's great novel and Butler the novelist dominate the perspective.

In the person of Ernest Pontifex, his hero,

Samuel Butler has remarked that a son first quarrels with his father about nine months before he is born. With equal truth it might be said that a work of art quarrels with its creator from the moment when the first outline or letter of it is set down : imaginative progeny, no less than physical, insists on setting up a life of its own. The quarrel between Butler and *The Way of All Flesh* was a long one, for it began in 1872 and continued intermittently till 1884. Even then Butler intended to resume the quarrel, though he never actually found time to revise the book, as he intended : however, he was able, from excellent motives, to suppress with a Pontifexian tenacity the struggle of his offspring for complete independence until after his death. It first appeared in 1903, since which date its stature and the signs of its influence have continuously grown to a very considerable amplitude. To trace its influence in English fiction and, through Mr. Shaw, in English drama would alone occupy a whole chapter. And it might be amusing to speculate in what frame of mind Butler, brought to realise the dramatic possibilities latent in the disruption of family shackles, would now contemplate this side of his immortality ; but that is not my intention.

Ernest Pontifex did not add that a son, in insisting upon a life of his own, also brought into existence a father. No child, no father, is a true proposition; besides, upon Butler's own principles of morality, motives go for nothing and results alone count. It is abundantly clear in the person of Theobald Pontifex, that a man, as father, is very different from what he is as son or husband. There need be no reluctance, therefore, to speak of Butler the novelist. *The Way of All Flesh* brought him into existence a year after Butler the man became ashes, fertilising the shrubs of a cemetery. He had affinities with the author of *Erewhon*, a delightful teller of philosophic fantasies, but he was not the same. He was a bigger man altogether, who, instead of imagining, upon analogies, things that were not, looked steadily upon things as they are and called them by their true names. What manner of novelist he was *The Way of All Flesh* reveals no less completely than Ernest, Joseph and Charlotte Pontifex revealed the nature of their father. In particular, it reveals that this novelist, whose creative energy * it exhausted, was through and

* *I.e.* as novelist, since he wrote no other novel comparable with this.

through an artist,—a guise under which Butler is, as a rule, but summarily discussed.

Twelve years, or more, ago it might have seemed unnecessary to insist upon this, since the artistic crop borne by *The Way of All Flesh* matured in the years following the appearance of its second edition in 1908. Then came the war—a high explosive far more powerful than any which Butler commanded. The emancipations of a century were crowded into five years. There came, too, the tremendous interest in psychology, particularly in that of the unconscious, which I do not suppose that Butler had in view when he wrote : *

“ How little do we know our thoughts—our reflex actions indeed, yes; but our reflex reflections ! Man, forsooth, prides himself on his consciousness ! We boast that we differ from the winds and waves and falling stones and plants, which grow they know not why, and from the wandering creatures which go up and down after their prey, as we are pleased to say without the help of reason. We know so well what we are doing ourselves and why we do it, do we not ? I fancy that there is some truth in the view which is being put forward

* *The Way of all Flesh*, Chap. V, final paragraph.

nowadays, that it is our less conscious thoughts and our less conscious actions which mainly mould our lives and the lives of those that spring from us."

Butler, I suggest, was referring to his own ideas about unconscious memory—a biological, not psychological, spring of action, and not anticipating the day when man would pride himself overmuch on his unconsciousness; and my belief is borne out by the dialogue which he supposes the "dumb Ernest" to hold at school with the conscious Ernest about the difficulties of a growing boy. For the moment, therefore, owing to rapid social developments and new orientations of thought, the artistic influence of Butler seems to be arrested, while his scientific interest has revived: though this does not mean that to read *The Way of All Flesh* is a less stimulating experience than formerly or that its truth is diminished. Moreover, on the publication of Butler's biography there was observable a tendency to decry his artistic reputation on the ground that, in this novel, much that had been taken to be the work of creative imagination was, in truth, an accurate transcription of facts. In particular, it caused scandal to some critics that the sentimental

letter written to her two sons by Christina Pontifex before the birth of her third child, and artfully touched up in later years (Chapter XXV), was an actual document, printed verbatim, which Butler's mother had written : as if they had discovered that a cast of a living hand or foot had been incorporated in some famous statue. They seemed to hold that because portions of this novel had an exact counterpart in the realm of facts they had lost value, and that a realism so slavish destroyed all artistic significance.

This view is entirely erroneous, although upon general grounds and by partial analogies it can to some extent be justified : much theory can be built up on the imprudence of sewing a real trousers-button into an oil-painting. In this instance, however, the view must be combated—and not in the least upon general grounds—for it is precisely by this line of approach that the real greatness and the occasional defects of *The Way of All Flesh* become apparent. Nothing need be denied and nothing excused : for, in truth, there is more than one way of constructing a work of art, while a great work of art, howsoever constructed, has certain qualities which stamp it far more indubitably than

greatness of mind or character stamps human features. Nor need we seek to call in the sturdiness and strength of the book's morals to redress any failure of art, for no bad novel was ever redeemed by excellent morals. Butler's views on belief and human conduct, sincere, penetrating, original and testing to those who receive them, stand by themselves as the general inspiration of his whole life's work, but they are not here in question either as decorations or compensations. *The Way of All Flesh* has been called bitter, depressing and immoral, but against this misreading of it all that need be said is that it bears out, both in the person of Overton, its narrator, and Ernest Pontifex, its hero, what Mr. Festing Jones wrote of Butler's own faith:

"All through his life . . . nothing ever shook his belief that if a man loves God he cannot come to much harm. We may not always know very clearly what is meant by God, and things may not always work together for the particular kind of good that we desire; but there is a 'something as yet but darkly known which makes right right and wrong wrong,' and no man can ultimately fail who obeys the dictates of that voice which we can

all hear within us if we will but listen. But he must obey without regard to theological dogmas or social conventions; he must never allow mistakes to dishearten him—mistakes made in good faith will teach him more than anything else; and he must never grow weary of taking pains. Then each difficulty will vanish like a morning mist, and his next step will be made clear.”

The Way of All Flesh—a picturesque, ominous but really somewhat unsatisfactory title—was originally to have been called “Ernest Pontifex: a Study in Domestic Life”; and the rejected title, if less ornamental, would have been more suitable, for it is a study of the particular, not of the general. It is the life-story of Ernest Pontifex, son of an Anglican clergyman, grandson of a prosperous publisher and great-grandson of a sturdy yeoman-carpenter; and its climax, as Mr. Festing Jones says, “is the spiritual and physical emancipation of a human being from the unnatural restraints imposed upon him by the stupidity, folly and ignorance of those who had controlled his early life.” It is necessary to recall the main outlines of the narrative, which is supposed to be written down in 1867 (with

a postscript written in 1882) by a Mr. Overton, a contemporary of Ernest's father. Both Ernest and Overton, Mr. Festing Jones tells us, are pieces of self-portraiture and give "a far better idea of Butler than could ever be given by anyone else, except that . . . he suppresses many of his good points."

At the opening of the book, after a brief introduction to the sturdy character of the yeoman Pontifex, the rise of his son, George Pontifex, to prosperity is described. This George, a masterful, choleric, hard-headed man, has five children, all of whom, in the fashion of the day, he bullies. Theobald, his dull and downtrodden second son, acquiescently follows the career of parson laid down for him. He goes to Cambridge, his doubts about his vocation are effectively nipped by his father, he becomes Fellow of his college, is ordained, and, after some hesitation, having secured a College living, marries the romantically religious daughter of another clergyman. Theobald and Christina Pontifex settle down comfortably to the pastoral life in the parish of Battersby, a happy couple—Theodore absolute master, Christina his adoring helpmate—with not a single doubt in their heads as to the creed they serve, the efficacy of their minis-

trations, their own goodness or the good fortune of all those who are so blessed as to be of their household. The Pontifex mind, in fact, has come out in Theobald, only to be abated in the presence of his father.

Ernest, their eldest child, is born in 1835 : two other children follow him. He suffers parental tyranny—suppression, overwork and incessant punishment—from his earliest years, but not, like his father before him, with a dull acquiescence. A kind of inarticulate revolt, even in childhood, stirs inside him and leads him to bewildered questionings and to practical judgments of his parents which convince him, not them, of sin. This sad conviction of inferiority, which is due to the persistent working of his instincts against his persuasions, pursues him at school, where he is an unsatisfactory boy. For the moment, however, while he is still under Dr. Skinner at Roughborough, the interest taken in him by his enlightened Aunt Alethea—a portrait of Butler's friend Miss Savage—opens him out, develops his mind and body, and purges him of some crudities. Then Alethea dies, leaving £15,000 in Overton's hands to accumulate for Ernest till he is twenty-eight. The trust is to be secret, for she insists that the boy shall make his inevitable

mistakes upon the legacy of £2,500 left him by his grandfather.

Like Theobald, Ernest is sent to Cambridge, to become, in his turn, a parson. He is happy at Cambridge and afflicted by no doubts. Instead, he takes a strong evangelical turn and accepts a curacy in London. His ferment of mind, already begun, becomes more intense owing partly to the influence of his fellow-curate, one Pryer, an unscrupulous man with High Church notions, who gets possession of all Ernest's legacy and loses it, finally, in speculation. But Ernest's *malaise* is also due to an inner conviction of increasing intensity, that he is living a lie. By way of convincing himself of his own genuineness he determines to convert the other lodgers in his mean lodgings off Drury Lane. Instead, his own eyes are opened to his own ignorance, and, almost simultaneously, his sexual impulses overpower him. Having invaded, in his folly, the room of a perfectly virtuous young milliner, he is condemned to six months' hard labour. In prison, after a brain-illness, his mind clears. He will see no more of his parents, he will no longer be a clergyman, no longer a gentleman. He will earn his livelihood as a tailor, and start becoming a man as a pauper. Over-

ton, watching him, lets him go his own way, even though this includes marrying a young woman of undesirable character who had once been a servant at Battersby. Ernest and Ellen set up a successful secondhand clothes business, and two children are born. But Ellen drinks and drags him down to misery and almost to ruin. Having learned the last lesson of his folly, he is saved from the worst of its effects by getting rid of Ellen. As Overton's secretary his self-respect and character are built up again, and his mind broadened by travel, till he is fit to assume possession of his weath. We leave him a man of letters such as Butler was himself, at odds with his own literary generation, but writing for another, and as firmly fixed upon his moral and intellectual base as his own creator.

Such is the outline of the book; and to this, before we estimate its artistic worth, must be added an account of those parts which were transcribed from reality. Mr. Festing Jones says that the portraits of Butler's father and mother in Theobald and Christina Pontifex were "as accurate as he could make them," and that there is very little that Butler remembered of his own early life which is not reproduced in the novel. Moreover, old George Pontifex is a secondary portrait of Butler's

father, whose behaviour to Butler, when the latter expressed doubts about his vocation at Cambridge, is practically photographed in the account of George Pontifex' correspondence with Theobald. We may assume that Butler's school and university days were accurately transcribed, except that there was for him no kind Aunt Alethea; and we know that Butler's own lodgings in Heddon Street were the close original of Ernest's lodgings in Ashpit Place. Mrs. Jupp, Ernest's Rabelaisian landlady, was a portrait of a relation's housekeeper. The whole of Ernest's married life with Ellen was taken from the experiences of a friend of Butler's, though Mr. Festing Jones does not say how far the details corresponded. Finally, towards the end of the book, Butler gives an account, in Ernest's person, of his own fortunes as journalist and writer. Multifarious minor details throughout are taken from notes made in Butler's voluminous notebook, but the most important element in the "origins" is that in which Butler was remembering his own parents and growth to manhood—a memory extending over nearly fifty chapters, as accurately set down as possible, with family correspondence true in substance though phraseologically altered.

Such is the novel that we have to consider. Is it merely an embroidered autobiography or is it primarily a work of artistic imagination? It is only by reading the book, striving to keep its whole emotional and structural balance before our minds and determining where its main importance lies, that we can answer the question. If it emerges from this test as little more than a man's cruel revenge upon honestly misguided parents, an unsympathetic and realistic "study" of the knobby crust of Victorian family life cracking under stresses, or a polemic against dogmatic religion, then we may agree that there is nothing left but to admire the dry lucidity of its style, the extraordinary vivacity of its portraiture and the ingenuity of its argument and to pass onward, classing it with such a work of art in its kind as Sir Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*. Yet to take such a view is really impossible. It is precluded from the first by the design of the book, which is to represent the struggle for mastery of his soul and his fate of a man against whom, biologically, socially and materially, the dice were weighted far more heavily than they were against Butler himself. Butler's own victory was won, in essentials, when he refused ordination and emigrated to New Zealand, whereas

it is only after Ernest Pontifex was ordained that the Furies really descended upon him. The first half of the book—that in which actual reminiscence preponderates—is then seen to have been simply a preparation for those swift and admirable ten chapters in which the unhappy and exalted young man is deprived almost simultaneously of his beliefs, his money, his self-respect and his liberty.

Here, at the first real climax of the book, at the very point where personal reminiscence (except for certain accessories) gave out, the author's creative imagination takes control of the story with a masterly ease, shocks us, surprises us and compels our attention. We forget the amenities which have gone before, the minute presentation of life at Battersby Rectory, the suppressed indignation, the philosophic humour, even the skill with which our knowledge of Ernest's chequered growth has been built up; we are no longer irritated and amused alternately by Theobald or Christina, and we dwell no more than does Butler upon that gold-mine of broad comedy, Mrs. Jupp, the landlady; for Ernest Pontifex fills the whole picture as the type, though not the first one, of a man chastened, for his own good, almost to annihilation. Without any change

in the style or heightening of the tone, without declamation or sobs, Butler's imagination, when at last it takes sole control, raises the figure of Ernest to a poetic grandeur—to a grandeur, that is, independent of particular circumstances but immediately and always impressive, like the progress of a great musical theme, because its creator's expression has risen to the height of his idea.

It is not easy in descriptive words to convey the effect which is produced at this central passage of the book by Butler's imaginative mastery of his theme, since almost any phrase or metaphor used to describe this perfectly unmistakable thing tends to connote some swelling of language or thickening of orchestration. Butler was a humorist; he had deliberately chosen to narrate this story through the mind of an elderly man who, like himself, had long ago measured the follies of mankind and developed, for the description of them, a plain, lucid, unembellished but extremely effective prose style—a smooth but rapid stream continually lit by mischievous glints. No waves roll up in this stream at the moment of Ernest's downfall, and the glints of humorous reflection do not cease; but only incurable sniggerers could miss, underneath the even, critical

description of Ernest in prison, the intensity of Butler's emotion or the power with which it is expressed. There is nothing nobler in man than his capacity for self-regeneration, and no theme is more absorbing in prose or poetry than that of a just but oppressed man coming, as we say, to his own. Butler chose this theme—the theme of Job and of Odysseus—for an unpoetical novel of modern life, and yet after reading the six chapters of Ernest's captivity * how can it be said that his art fell short of its theme? Step by step we see Ernest, stripped of everything, recover all that a man needs—his health, his reason, his mental vision, his righteous indignation, his independence of will, the power of renunciation, faith in himself and belief in a fundamental principle of morality; and all quietly, decisively and inevitably, not that the hero may be held up to our admiration with blowing of trumpets, but that the agony it may cost for a man to gain his soul might, in its representation, compel and invigorate the minds of others. Indeed it was for no idle sport or gusty swelling of the bosom that Butler imagined these chapters, or he would not have followed the noble words in which Ernest's rehabilitation and deep faith are summed up

* LXIV-LXIX.

by the painful scene where, on his release, Ernest renounces his parents in their presence.

“He had nothing more to lose; money, friends, character, all were gone for a very long time if not for ever; but there was something else also that had taken its flight along with these. I mean the fear of that which man could do unto him. *Cantabit vacuus*. Who could hurt him more than he had been hurt already? Let him but be able to earn his bread, and he knew of nothing which he dared not venture if it would make the world a happier place for those who were young and loveable. Herein he found so much comfort that he almost wished he had lost his reputation even more completely—for he saw that it was like a man’s life which may be found of them that lose it and lost of them that would find it. He should not have had the courage to give up all for Christ’s sake, but now Christ had mercifully taken all, and lo ! it seemed as though all were found” (Chapter LXVIII).

And yet when the supreme wrench came of tearing himself apart from those parents whose anxiety, timidity, stupidity, impatience and imperfect love had ruined, and could yet ruin, his life, it was as though he had died again.

“ By this time he was at the prison gate, and in another moment was at liberty. After he had got a few steps out he turned his face to the prison wall, leant against it for support, and wept as though his heart would break ” (Chapter LXIX).

It is no falsely heroic figure who, after these bitter moments, “ pulled himself together and turned into the labyrinth of small streets which opened out in front of him.”

This point is the second and greatest climax of the book. Ernest Pontifex turns to life anew, strong in the complete mastery of himself. He has still to learn and master the world about him, and in that also painful process we subsequently follow him. In the sequel, which describes his marriage, its disaster and the upbringing of his children, we are not always so highly impressed with the inevitability of Butler's art, though we can still recognise his firm hold on his central character and admire the strength of his narrative. There are passages, however, when Butler's individual experiences and prejudices—about marriage, for instance—overburden the story, which he might have lightened in revision. Yet the old high note of mastery sounds again

in those two concluding chapters where Ernest, now a man of wealth and firmly poised, revisits Battersby as his mother lies dying, and sees with clear eyes the changes and the permanences of that scene where he had as a boy seen dimly and suffered so much. There is a ripe and serene art here which Butler never excelled. The behaviour of Theobald and Christina when they hear of Ernest's fortune, the attitude of his brother and sister, the day-dreams and tremors of the dying woman, romantic to the last, and Theobald's impatient stoicism are represented with an extraordinary clarity, yet with a certain tenderness that is not excluded by the old humour. And though mischievous memory irrepressibly colours the presentation of the old people—

“ ‘She has been the comfort and mainstay of my life for more than thirty years,’ said Theobald as soon as all was over, ‘but one could not wish it prolonged,’ and he buried his face in his handkerchief to conceal his want of emotion,”—

yet we leave them, as did Ernest, reconciled and with a better understanding both of their strength and their weakness.

At these culminating points in *The Way of*

All Flesh, then, precisely where its sweep becomes most compelling and language is most impressively fused with thought, we see an artist at work, not directly transcribing from experience, but using the creative imagination—and that, above all, is the artist's function—to give the equivalent, or more than the equivalent, of experience. Nothing so high or so poetic as Ernest's fall and recovery happened to Butler himself; but in his imaginative art Butler the artist recreated in nobler stature, in purer outline and more significant form, the essentials, not the particularities, of Butler the man. Moreover, if this is a true account, the presence of the creative artist throughout the book must be accepted, for there is no obvious break in the style or the temper where the satirical historian or the polemical fabulist might be presumed to have yielded the pen to a higher influence. It would be ridiculous to suppose that an artist suddenly supervened about the fiftieth chapter, when the organic unity of the whole book is perfectly obvious. If the artist was present at all he was present throughout. In fact, the critical sensibility has no grounds at all for denying his presence at any stage, and hardly needs the support of Miss Savage—a woman of exquisite perception

—who, as we know from Mr. Festing Jones's *Life*, was, throughout the book's composition, praising, criticising and encouraging the artist. That being realised, the earlier and more directly reminiscent parts of *The Way of All Flesh* appear in their true proportions; and further, we can observe and appraise as a whole this work of a very gifted but also inexperienced artist, who, while he could use the most intimate records of his perceptive mind with an amazing tact and efficacy, could at other times overburden his story with detail which was both otiose and ineffective.

The book has a rhythm of seven beats or movements. The first of these extends from the beginning to Theodore's marriage with Christina Allaby (Chapter XIII); the second deals with Battersby Rectory and Ernest's boyhood up to the death of his aunt Alethea (Chapter XXXVI); the third takes Ernest through Cambridge to his ordination (Chapter L); the fourth is the movement of Ernest's disaster and ends with Overton's typical meditation on Theobald's reception of the news: "Theobald acted with a readier and acuter moral sense than I had given him credit for. 'I will have nothing more to do with him,' he exclaimed promptly" (Chapter LXIII); the

fifth movement is Ernest's regeneration and liberation (Chapter LXX); the sixth takes him through the period of his marriage till Ellen is disposed of (Chapter LXXVII); and the seventh, which contains the great return of Ernest to Battersby, tails off into the post-script.

In the first movement Butler is by some supposed to have lingered too long owing to his preoccupation with the influence of heredity, but, as a matter of fact, there is only one superfluous chapter in an otherwise quite admirable piece of narration. That chapter is the interpolated account of George Pontifex's foreign tour, with the author's satirical remarks about Mendelssohn in the picture gallery at Florence. For the rest, the whole movement is rapid, pointed and delightful in its humour, proving that Butler's grasp of his theme was imaginative from the outset. His material was a theory of heredity and an actual correspondence with his father about ordination. He gives plastic form to the first in his lively sketch of the oldest Pontifex, of George's rise to prosperity, of old Pontifex's death and George's "will-shaking" at his children. As for commentary, it would be a severe critic who could wish away the elaboration of the remark that George liked his

money better than his children because it was never naughty, or the advice to parents who wish to live a quiet life. The ordination controversy only occupies one chapter, and the fact that Butler did not have to invent it does not preclude our admiring the artistic skill with which he uses it. From that chapter we pass to the comedy of Theobald's entry into the Allaby family, the matchmaking of Mrs. Allaby, Theobald's courting, his despairing surrender to the claim of matrimony, and the triumphant humour of his wedding drive with Christina to Newmarket. The man who imagined that swift struggle of temperaments and the dialogue which resulted in Christina's tearful consent to order dinner at the inn has every right to be called a great novelist.

The second movement opens with that extremely fine meditation upon service in Battersby church in the old days, which, did space allow, might interestingly be compared with similar passages in *Adam Bede* and with Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Butler's eloquence yields nothing to either :

“ Gone now are the clarinet, the violoncello and the trombone, wild minstrelsy as of the doleful creatures in Ezekiel, discordant but

infinitely pathetic. Gone is that scarebabe stentor, that bellowing bull of Bashan the village blacksmith, gone is the melodious carpenter, gone the brawny shepherd with the red hair, who roared more lustily than all, until they came to the words, 'Shepherds with your flocks abiding,' when modesty covered him with confusion, and compelled him to be silent, as though his own health were being drunk. . . ."

And thereafter the movement falls into two parts, the first describing Theobald, Christina and Ernest's oppressed life, and the second Ernest's brief happiness in the sun of his aunt Alethea's wise attention. The first of these parts is minutely autobiographical, and contains redundancies, but these are not the most intimate data of memory. In the wonderful portraits of Theobald and Christina, in the description of Theobald's uneasy visitation of the sick, of the christening dinner, and in Overton's reflections on family prayers Butler shows the same kind of imagination with which he credited the authoress of the *Odyssey*—that "highest kind of imagination which consists in wise selection and judicious application of material derived from life." We feel the hand of a great novelist in these masterly pictures,

and nothing that Mr. Festing Jones tells us of their origin destroys that feeling. On the other hand, had we never known that Christina's letter was an actual one, it would still appear to us as unnecessary, for it does nothing to strengthen our knowledge of Christina; and the same thing may be said of certain other memories—Ernest's determination to have a natural child, Ernest's remarks on clergymen as fathers, and the elaborate portrait of Dr. Kennedy under the name of Dr. Skinner. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Butler's inexperience resulted in excess. But how admirable and lifelike, and how moving, is the picture of Ernest's school-days! Dickens himself could have given no more living portrait of an unhappy child, nor could he have imagined anyone more wise and delightful than Alethea Pontifex. The invention of Alethea was an imaginative stroke of great excellence, for it gives, at a critical period in Ernest's life, a friendly but unprejudiced view of his virtues and follies, out of which all the rest of the book develops.

The third movement is lively throughout. The whole incident of Ellen's dismissal and Ernest's giving her his watch, delightfully told, is followed by Theobald's comic inquisition into the morality of Roughborough, the

admirable summary of Ernest's happiness at Cambridge, the episode of the Simeonites and the impressive sermon of the Rev. Gideon Hawke. Butler wrote most eloquent sermons for other people, as readers of *Erewhon Revisited* will remember. Then follow the two great culminating movements of Ernest's fall and recovery, of which enough has already been said. I can only insist again that they set irremovably the stamp of great art upon *The Way of All Flesh*. After these the marriage movement, for all its sober pointedness, is something of a relaxation; and it is perhaps to be regretted that Butler failed to use here the artistic possibilities of Mrs. Jupp, the abandoned old landlady of Ernest's London lodgings. Here was a figure of the stature and comic force of a Sairey Gamp, yet Butler, though obviously delighted with her racy speech and her worldly wisdom, only uses her as an accessory. More of Mrs. Jupp and less of Ernest's mental development would have immeasurably improved the two final movements, the last of which in particular is too highly charged with Butler's interest in his own figure as a writer. Chapters LXXVIII to LXXXI and LXXXIII to the end needed severely telescoping, if they were not to be, as

they now irrevocably are, a somewhat tedious setting for those two great chapters of the return to Battersby, where Butler's creative imagination soars up again to its full height.

Surveyed as a whole, unless the vision be obscured by unalterable prejudice or blurred by the fog of outraged convictions, how imposing is this work, and how unimportant its blemishes compared with the great rhythm of its design and the vital vigour of its detail ! No wonder that it inspired Mr. Bernard Shaw, a writer of far narrower imagination than Samuel Butler. Place it beside *David Copperfield*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or *Pendennis*, and it neither wilts nor looks wan, though it stands to these other accounts of a young man's progress in the strongest possible contrast. Butler had neither Dickens' dramatic force nor Thackeray's power of cumulatively marshalling detail, but in delicacy of perception, in the vivacity of his episodes, in the skilful diversification of narrative accent, as well as in his quite original humour, he holds his own with ease. Moreover, if truth be in question, there are few British novelists that might not shrink from a test by Butler, who threw a pale but searching beam upon the organic structure of social life which makes the lights of Dickens' enthusiasm

and of Thackeray's regretful disillusionment seem flickering indeed; and if it be emotion, there was no indignation fiercer than that which smouldered under the studied calmness of Butler's eloquence. God denied him the poet's power to handle with ease the symbols of beauty, but the beauty that he felt and the absence of it that he hated are evident enough, though he had to be content that Händel's music expressed his own dumb poetry. Like Ernest, often bewildered, often injudicious, a man of impulse rather than settled plan, a critic rather than a lover of humanity, there was nothing "which he dared not venture if it would make the world a happier place for those who were young and lovable." *The Way of All Flesh*, little as he realised it, was the greatest of his ventures, and the world is already the better for its influence.

IX

THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM DE MORGAN

BENVENUTO CELLINI, the silversmith, wrote an entertaining autobiography, but William de Morgan is the only instance of a potter turning novelist. Good pottery is expensive, while entertaining novels are cheap: this economic fact made a great difference to William de Morgan, who strove for nearly thirty years to make an unbusinesslike pottery pay and, when financial failure broke the pottery, won popular fame and a decent income by exploiting a by-product of his imagination. By one of life's little ironies, which might have prompted Mr. Hardy's muse, the primary artist in William de Morgan was ignored by all but a few, while the secondary artist was lauded with effusive eulogy. He regarded this singular fate, so far as we know, without bitterness or irony, accepting the early neglect with cheerful fortitude and the later admiration with grateful simplicity. Fortune took an ancient shuttle-

cock, decked it with new feathers and, for once, drove it high up into the air with the battledore that had so often struck it groundwards. The child within us applauds her action, for belated prosperity after years of disappointment is approved by our romantic sense; but should we not rather blame her in the first instance for limiting the output of a supreme craftsman? Even as it was, William de Morgan's inventive skill, industrious research, and subtle sense of plastic beauty rendered magnificent service to the potter's art in England; but, given success instead of failure, his example and the output of his factories might have made a world-famous epoch in ceramics. We should not then have had *Joseph Vance*, it is true; but one is led to wonder, gazing at his pottery in the Museum, how many of such novels should go to a pot, bowl or tile of so consummate workmanship. In two of his novels he poured humorous contempt upon his own false start as a painter: the falseness of the start is evident, but he soon found his way into a track that was pre-eminently his own. From the works that he produced and from his letters published in Mrs. Stirling's memoir * it is obvious that upon the art

* *William de Morgan and his Wife*, by A. M. W. Stirling: Thornton Butterworth.

of ceramics he lavished the whole of his enterprising inventiveness, his natural energy, and that mysterious inborn sense of texture, colour and form which not even the aptest pupil could copy. Those who think of him only as a lovable elderly gentleman who wrote charming, leisurely, discursive novels forget that, as a young and impassioned potter, he once burnt as fiercely as one of his own furnaces.

It is by no means to disparage the novelist that the potter is recalled, but rather to give the whole man his due. William de Morgan's novels are but a part of him and, with all their peculiar charm, can hardly rank among masterpieces of fiction as his pots among masterpieces of pottery. It is enough to observe his different attitudes towards his two branches of creation to see why; and there is ample material in Mrs. Stirling's interesting, albeit fragmentary and uncritical memoir, for conducting this observation. On the one hand, we find absorption, determination, passion, an unending struggle to fathom the secrets of old lustres and glazes, and a high aim perpetually in view. As a potter he knew exactly what he wanted, on the plastic as well as the technical side. In his ceramic work, particularly where form and colour were concerned, he had that last touch

of superiority which puts a gulf between the best and the next best. He poured an inexhaustible fertility of imagination into this life's work of his, testing feverishly every possible material and abounding in mechanical inventions. His hold on his chosen art of ceramics was, in fact, the complete lordly hold of a master which no misfortune can shake. On the other hand, when we turn to the novels, we find amusement, delight, a wonderfully gifted dilettantism, the outpouring of a capacious memory through the channel of a sensitive yet humorous personality; but the passionate absorption and the lordly hold were not there. On his own confession, he approached literature not as an art but as a diversion. There were no secrets that he pined to fathom, and he sought no far-away ideal of beauty, even though, as a writer, he possessed some secrets which many have hunted in vain, and achieved beauty at times almost without knowing it. In one art he was an inspired leader; in the other he was a singular phenomenon two generations behind a literary age in which he took no interest. His reading had stopped short in youth with Dickens, and at the age of sixty-five he went on writing where he had left off reading. Luckily for him, he had a

natural genius for spinning a long yarn, and a remarkable power of observation. In any age and with any method these gifts will tell. Also, his literary powers were fresh when his memory was old and his experience mature. In this unique novelist *vieillesse savait et jeunesse pouvait*.

The story of William de Morgan's second career is too well known to need more than brief reference. Some time in 1901 he had, for his own amusement, written two chapters of a novel, just to see what he could do. "I have always loved grubby little boys," he explained later, "and I thought I should like to write the story of a grubby little boy." The result did not impress its author. It was nearly burnt, and afterwards consigned to the waste-paper basket, whence Mrs. de Morgan rescued it. The wise wife bided her opportunity. The South African War, with its financial depression, finished off the dying factory at Fulham, and the potter was depressed and idle. Influenza caught him and laid him on his back. Here was the opportunity. One day Mrs. de Morgan laid the rescued manuscript and a pencil by his bedside with the brief remark: "I think something might be made of this." When she returned,

the washing book and every scrap of paper within reach were already filled with a continuation of the story. Thus *Joseph Vance* was born. The book was finished in 1904 and published in 1906, when its author was sixty-seven. Its immediate success gave him an occupation which lasted him for the rest of his days. For another eleven years he quarried assiduously with his pen the rich placer-reef of his literary imagination. Seven more stories had been published and there were two lying unfinished when in January 1917 he died, tragically infected with trench fever.

The fragments of *The Old Man's Youth* show that increasing age and a marvellous fertility had in no way exhausted the charm with which he exploited his peculiar vein of reminiscence or the power of his literary personality to compel the affection of his readers. Yet there is nothing essential in his later novels that was not already in his first and finest, *Joseph Vance*. He himself knew it was his best, and inclined to believe that this was true of all first novels.

"Later works (he remarked once) may be an advance in construction, as they will certainly be more in conformity with accepted standards; but something will have gone from them, never to be regained, of the freshness,

the artlessness of expression which may be akin to genius."

This remark was true of his own work, but it curiously illustrates his own attitude towards his compositions. As a writer he found himself affected by contemporary criticism and influenced by contemporary standards; he could regret a certain freshness lost, having gained no increased mastery of expression to compensate for it. But this is not the attitude of the convinced artist, certainly not of the great potter, who paid small attention to criticism and proudly made his own standards, raising them higher and higher as he progressed from the first happy spontaneity to the conscious certainty of mature artistic expression. At the same time, if his novels and his attitude to them have not the quality of his pottery and his attitude towards it, it is worth while here to make the point that, in certain directions, his literary work gave an outlet to natural springs in his personality which had hardly entered the main channel of his ceramic art. It might possibly be maintained that William de Morgan was, before all things, an inventor : the process was perhaps more to him than the artistic conception. That type of inventiveness had ample scope in solving the technical problems

of firing, staining and glazing clay. But he had also that other type of inventiveness which is purely imaginative, and, as I at least feel, this comes out better in the elaboration of his complicated plots than in the conventional and rather archaistic designs which, under the strong influence of William Morris, he made for his pottery. At all events, in his novels this inventiveness could take long and sustained flights which resulted in those extraordinary, almost grotesque, complications which make the succinct statement of his plots a sheer impossibility. Here, too, comes in the element of supernaturalism which was very strongly in his nature, as we learn from Mrs. Stirling. His mother, we gather, was a convinced spiritualist, and his distinguished father, Augustus de Morgan, the mathematician, believed firmly in the possibility, even the probability, of further existences after mortal life. His father's beliefs, which were the basis of the kindly immortalism of Dr. Thorpe in *Joseph Vance*, and his mother's spiritualistic leanings entered into their son, and they found an issue in that fondness for supernatural manifestations which is shown in his novels. Over ghosts and apparitions, such as those who appeared to Alice in her basement, he took tremendous pains,

explaining their history with disproportionate elaboration, not for the sake of mere melodrama, but out of a genuine interest in that mysterious "other side" of which he was so hopeful. The other natural spring for which the novels furnished him an outlet was his wag-gish, philosophical humour. It is strange that the body of friends, of whom Burne-Jones was the centre, had such high spirits in daily intercourse and such melancholy in art. Burne-Jones's humorous letters are exquisite; Rossetti and Morris were anything but mopers, and de Morgan never lost the opportunity for a joke or a pun. When one looks at the dreamy faces and languorous attitudes, the sad patterns, the joyless greens and yellows, the heavy purples which distinguish this school of art, one wonders where they put all their high spirits when they sat down to paint. Not till he began to write novels did de Morgan find room for humour in his art, which is on the literary side anything but Morrisian. The Blessed Damozel might have walked upon his tiles and King Cophetua have poured a drink for the beggar maid out of his pots, but either would have been outraged had they been asked to include the reading of *Joseph Vance* among their pallid diversions. In the novels there are places

where the mood of facetious commentary becomes a little overpowering, but it is a pleasing, comfortable humour that must appeal to all but prigs. One feels that one is in company with a jovial man who, all his life, has chuckled secretly at the comedy of life's little things, and that he cannot keep the joke to himself any longer.

William de Morgan's novels, indeed, are the summary of "all his life." The original idea of *Joseph Vance* was a story supposed to be told to the narrator by an old man dying in a work-house. In the event Joseph Vance was presented as an elderly gentleman who, after twenty years of business life in South America, sat down in a lonely Bloomsbury lodging to recall a dead past, writing the memoir—which is the novel—"as an experiment to see how much I could recollect if I once began to try." The author's own attitude was not quite so simple, but, in the main, it is the mood of felicitous reminiscence which gives his novels their individual charm. He is peculiarly himself when he is looking backwards, as he is pre-eminently doing in *Joseph Vance*, *Alice-for-Short*, *When Ghost Meets Ghost*, and *The Old Man's Youth*. It is impossible to resist the fascination of being taken so delightfully by

the hand and led back to scenes remembered with so intimate a blend of tenderness and humour. If this element were abstracted from his novels, a great deal of their wide appeal would go with it. And the secret of his appeal is that he loved the past and dwelt upon it with a lingering joy that could not refrain from recording the minutest detail of a happier age when he and all his world were young.

“For these were the days of crinolines; of hair in cabbage-nets, packed round rubber inflations; of what may be called proto-croquet, with hoops so large that no one ever failed to get through, except you and me; the days when ‘*Ah che la morte*’ was the last new tune, and Landseer and Mulready the last words in art. They were the days when there had been but one Great Exhibition—think of it!—and the British Fleet could still get under canvas. We, being an old fogey, would so much like to go back to those days—to think of daguerreotypes as a stupendous triumph of science, balloons as indigenous to Cremorne, and table-turning as a nine-days wonder; in a word, to feel our biceps with satisfaction in an epoch when wheels went slow, folks played tunes and nobody had appendicitis.”

To the present, with its motor-cars and Impressionism, its noise and bustle, he was ironically resigned, but he could neither praise nor wholly understand it. It is hardly surprising that the scenes which he laid in it, those of *Somehow Good* and *It Can Never Happen Again*, were not realised with complete success. The saving graces of both these stories, in fact, are due to the surreptitious entry of the past. In the first the evocation of an unspoiled South Coast watering-place and in the second the description of Tallack Street—one of London's old facial sores unhealed by time—gave him his opportunities for going back topographically; while, on the human side, the characterisation, in general, is hardly distinguishable from that of his more distant retrospects. Sally, Professor Sales-Wilson, and the young doctor's odious old mother in *Somehow Good* belong to the Victorian age with Peggy Heath and Dr. Thorpe, while Jim Coupland, Lizarann and Aunt Steptoe in *It Can Never Happen Again* are contemporaries in spirit of little Joe Vance and of those denizens of Sapp's Court who chiefly enliven the multitudinous pages of *When Ghost Meets Ghost*. His comparative failures show that where a rich sense of the eighteen-fifties could not enter in by chink or cranny his hand became weak and his artistic sense confused.

His romance of the Stuart period, *An Affair of Dishonour*, is stiff and theatrical, and much of *It Can Never Happen Again* is awkward and unnatural. The uncertainty of his creative imagination, when not supported by experience, is exemplified particularly in the latter novel, the politer portions of which deal with the unfortunate love affairs of Alfred Challis, novelist, whose second wife, married in humble circumstances, refuses to keep pace with her husband's social progress. He is therefore landed in the arms of Judith Arkroyd, daughter of Sir Murgatroyd Arkroyd of Royd Hall. Mrs. Challis, her mind poisoned by a gossiping friend, deserts her husband, and the outcome of the passionate situation is made to depend wholly on the passing of the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, for Marianne Challis was the sister of his first wife. The dialogues of Challis and Judith reach the height of improbability for two lovers about to flout the world for love's sake. Here is a specimen, which must be glossed by saying that "Titus" was the inconceivable nickname invented for her lover by Judith, and that "Mumps" and "Chobbles" were his two children.

"You and Marianne have cried off a compact Law and Order condemned, while you still

had a right to do so. Is it credible that the new Act will tie you together again, willy-nilly?'

"'Dearest, try to see my difficulty. Don't think me cowardly or politic; only believe that it *is* a difficulty to me, and a serious one. Suppose us wedded—to-morrow—before the passing of the Act, anyhow. Suppose that when it comes it legitimates retrospectively every marriage that was not acknowledged void by *both* parties while it was still an unlawful one.'

"Judith withdrew her hand and looked away. 'Have you not acknowledged the illegitimacy of yours?' she said coldly.

"'In a sense I have.' Challis was evidently flinching under his consciousness of his position.

"'I do not like "in a sense," Titus. Is Marianne your wife or not?'

"'Listen to me, dearest. . . . Think what it would be for me if at some future time my two little girls were to suffer from a reproach their brother does not share, and charge me with giving my boy a better hold on the world than they could lay claim to. . . .'

"'It was their reproach from the beginning. . . .'

“ ‘ Yes—yes. But suppose this Act would, but for me, have conferred legitimacy retrospectively. . . . ’ ”

“ ‘ How “ but for you ” ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Why—clearly. It might include in its retrospective action only such marriages as were held valid by one or the other party at the date of the passing of the Bill, Mumps and Chobbles might be legitimate or no, according to my attitude toward their mother about our separation. It seems to me that my having refused to acknowledge it might make all the difference. . . . ’ Challis paused awkwardly.”

But incongruity of incident is not all. The vulgar, mischief-making Mrs. Eldridge and her equally vulgar and foolish dupe are admirably drawn, but Judith Arkroyd—the veriest novice could tell her for a dummy. Intended to be the brilliant and fascinating daughter of a baronet at the end of the nineteenth century, she is but a reflection of the average Victorian novelist’s convention for a nymph of the landed aristocracy—a social caste which was outside de Morgan’s range of observation. Challis himself creaks at the joints, but beside the wax-work figure of his siren he is vitality personified. The high society characters of *When Ghost*

Meets Ghost are equally impossible, whether you look at the earl's daughter discoursing sentimentously to her poet or nod over the middle-aged wooing of Mr. Pellew and Miss Dickenson, facetiously commented on by the author with exquisite tediousness. With the more passionate emotions, too, William de Morgan was not at home. His criminals and villains seem to have no particular motives for their villainy, and one is glad when their ill deeds are performed "off." Passions, whether of wickedness or love, did not burn fiercely in the old times which William de Morgan was recalling. So far as love was concerned, what figured there was the romantic attachment of boy and girl and the tender feeling, ripened by years, of husband and wife. The two early loves of Joseph Vance are painted as delicately as rose petals, but the consuming love that brings pain with its fiery joys was not within reach of his imagination. He took the romantic view of love, and puts it characteristically into the mouth of kind old Dr. Thorpe :

“ ‘ Love is the golden bead at the bottom of the Crucible. But love isn't thought, or perception, or even passion, in the ordinary sense. It's God knows what. I give it up. But it's

a breath of fresh air from the highest heaven brought somehow into the stuffy cellar of our existence. It's the flash of light that strikes on the wall of the tunnel our train is passing through, and shows us the burst of sunshine that is coming.' "

All his love affairs of young people typify this view, from the two pretty couples in *Alice-for-Short* to the unhappy love of Gracey in *The Old Man's Youth*. It is all sweet and fragrant, bright as a blade of grass after rain. Old people regard it with moist eyes of approval, and even its unhappiness leaves the soul untravaged. There were two *milieux* in which William de Morgan was thoroughly at home—that of the not too prosperous middle class to which he belonged himself and that of London's mean streets whose inhabitants he had studied with constant affection. His romantic young loves belong to the middle class, and his domestic attachments—it is curious to note—usually to the mean streets. Middle-class elderly couples in his novels tend to resolve themselves into a whimsically philosophical husband who tolerates with chaff the ill-tempered fussiness of a tiresome Gorgon, whereas his Christopher Vance is charming

to his Missus and his Uncle Mo cherishes in Sapp's Court his unofficial helpmeet Aunt Maria. The higher and more devastating passions he reserves for the aristocracy or for villains and unsatisfactory snares of middle-class youth, like the Lavinia Straker of *Alice-for-Short*; but the fire is cold and unconvincing, like one of those fires that burn in grates on the stage, lurid but obviously sham.

However, when William de Morgan was at home he was thoroughly installed with every circumstance of comfort. To read him then is like paying one of those precious visits of childhood to a charming elderly relative who kept special biscuits for tea and, with a certain twinkling gaiety, treated one gravely as an equal while showing an intimate sympathy with one's immature views. There is an attractiveness in his whole attitude which is hardly explicable upon purely æsthetic grounds, just as there was in our relative's way of pouring out tea or peeling an orange. The charm was all of a piece with the person and the room he sat in; and William de Morgan's leisurely fitting together of a scene, his familiar asides to his reader, his knowing waggishness, his passion for children and his pity for age are all of a piece with the character which, as narrator,

he so amply reveals—the character of a fatherly, whimsical, tender, regretful, courageous, and humble-minded old English gentleman who believed firmly in the ultimate goodness of every created thing. If his fascinated readers sometimes praised his novels extravagantly it was not surprising, for his personality deserved the praise, and half the virtue, or more, of his stories, lies in the personality of their teller. There was no need to keep his personality out of the way, for the very reason that he was remembering rather than creating. He was not then the potter, struggling with lifeless clay, but like one who, closing his eyes, sees immediately a phantasmagoria pass before them. As he confessed, his characters came to him, and he waited to see what they would do. He had only to tell his readers what he saw and to comment lavishly, as kindly uncles do, on the stories of the past that they tell by the fireside. There are times when, with an almost pathetic earnestness, he calls the reader's attention to a particular situation, as if both author and reader were sitting in the stalls at somebody else's play. When, for instance, the two sisters in *When Ghost Meets Ghost*, after long thinking each other dead, draw near in extreme old age to their mutual recognition, he com-

ments with tears in his eyes on the pathos of their position, as if he had been taken for the first time to see them by his gentle Gwendolen. We feel, when we most freely surrender to him, that we are depending, not on the force of his imagination, but on the clarity of his vision.

When he sees clearly, his people live and his places become solid before our eyes. No character lives more splendidly than Christopher Vance, the father of Joe, who, after his classic fight with Peter Gunn, founded his fortunes upon a second-hand signboard that proclaimed him, for the first time, builder. Into this character William de Morgan put all the combination of shrewdness and incapability, the kindliness, the improvidence, the venial dishonesty and the straightforwardness of intention which impressed him, after many years' study of his own potters, as typical of the London working man in the 'fifties. Half the light goes out of the story when Christopher Vance dies, for his every appearance is rich comedy. Mr. Vance's delightful peculiarities can only be illustrated by reference, so regardless is his creator of space, but it is, perhaps, permissible to suppose that most readers will remember such scenes as the "crocking" of the "hinseck," the buying of the signboard,

the first visit to Poplar Villa, the broaching of Pure Cairn Magorrrachan Mountain Dew after the first Mrs. Vance's funeral, and the lordly style in which, at the height of his prosperity, he outlined his methods of business. Alongside of Christopher Vance and his like—Jim Coupland in *Alice-for-Short*, Uncle Mo in *When Ghost Meets Ghost*, and the odd-job man in *The Old Man's Youth*—comes a whole gallery of London children which certainly Dickens cannot outdo. William de Morgan loved the street Arab fiercely and knew the shy, brave souls of these grubby boys and girls as intimately as their Cockney accents. The child Joe Vance, Alice in the dark basement with her drunken parents, the golden-hearted ragamuffin who makes a brief appearance in *Somehow Good*, Lizarann in *It Can Never Happen Again*, and Dave and Dolly in *When Ghost Meets Ghost* are all brothers and sisters—one family of their creator's affection and pity : and it is significant that one so loth as he to admit real evil in the world allowed Peggy Heath, one of his excellent young ladies, musing on the miseries of Alice's early life, indignantly to criticise her Creator.

Peggy herself, Lossie, Janey and all the other sweet young images of William de Morgan's

backward look on female beauty trip through his novels with dainty steps and roguish faces. Let him put them in what period he pleases, they are all sunny ringleted misses of the eighteen-fifties who are affectionately cheeky to their fathers and ready to devour any baby on sight. To imagine them all together is like seeing the entry of the bridesmaids in the *Trial by Jury*, and the men among us, at all events, like the jurymen, sing mentally, "Cheer up, cheer up, we love you." They nurse infectious diseases at a moment's notice and rescue toddlers from the slums enthusiastically: even Sally in *Somehow Good*, who was unusually pert and slangy, nearly lost her life in rescuing her unknown father from drowning. Perhaps they are a little too faultless, a little too much the old man's memory of a young man's dream, but they are natural none the less, just as their middle-aged parents—their comedy a trifle exaggerated—are natural too. Augustus de Morgan was the original of Dr. Thorpe and all the other philosophical fathers of families, but we shall not inquire who were the originals of his elderly ladies who, unless poor or bedridden, are fussy and intolerable. Yet they are not unreal, not half so unreal, for instance, as Mrs. Jellaby. William de Morgan had an unerring

touch in portraying the middle-class interior contemporary with Leech's drawings, and I can give no better instance than the breakfast scene near the opening of *Alice-for-Short*, where one by one a prosperous British family of the 'sixties is brought on to the stage.

It must be remarked, however, that his young men, even Joseph Vance, the best of them, have less solidity than the young women with whom they pair. They are never the real heroes of the story, but play distinctly second fiddle to the ladies. The paler and more ghostly character of these pleasant youths is not hard to explain. They were real ghosts, of the author himself, and still bound to him by a bit of emotional ectoplasm. He could not quite detach them, and they are really at their best when their ghostliness is most freely recognised and they are presented, like Joseph Vance, as looking at themselves with the yearning eyes of far more elderly beings now lamenting stiffened limbs and deploring lost opportunities. Charles Heath, the young man of *Alice-for-Short*, by his very objectification exemplifies this point; for he is only saved from being a thing of naught by being made the medium for engaging memories of his author's early days as an artist without a vocation.

It may be said of William de Morgan's best characters that, if they are less lively than Dickens', they are more true to life. There is an almost historical accuracy in their presentation which gives them more than an artistic importance. The same is true of another character, perhaps his most fondly regarded of all—the character of mid-nineteenth century London. There was not a stone of her pavements that he did not love, and in his affectionate delineation of her alleys, smells, noises, fogs and familiar voices he has immortalised her aspect as she stood on the brink of that mechanical modernity which he lived to deplore. The whole opening of *Joseph Vance*, with its dialogue in the public-house and the fight that followed, Joe's 'bus ride to Hampstead, Lossie's description of the voyage to Herne Bay, the gloomy house in whose dingy cellar little Alice crept shivering, the gorgeous fog effects in *Somehow Good* and elsewhere, the Tallack Street of *It Can Never Happen Again*, the wistful reminiscences of a countrified Chelsea in *The Old Man's Youth*, and, above all, the picture of Sapp's Court in *When Ghost Meets Ghost* are masterpieces of description in which William de Morgan rose to his highest level. The atmosphere and aspect of his boyhood's London

had become ingrained in his memory: he speaks of them with the familiarity of ancient friendship, and introduces them with a casual humour and a laugh at their peculiarities that reveal the depth of his affection.

“ It went downhill under the archway when you did go in, and you came to a step. If you did not tumble owing to the suddenness and depth of this step, you came to another; and were stupefied by reaching the ground four inches sooner than you expected, and made conscious that your skeleton had been driven an equal distance upwards through your system. Then you could see Sapp’s Court, but under provocation, from its entry. When you recovered your temper you admitted that it was a better court than you anticipated.

“ And the residences were in a row on the left, and there was a dead wall on the right with an inscription on a stone in it that said the ground twelve inches beyond belonged to somebody else. The wall was in the confidence of the main street, lending itself to a fiction that the houses therein had gardens or yards behind them. They hadn’t; but the tenants believed they had, and hung out chemises and nightgowns and shorts to dry in the areas they had built

their faith on ; and really, if they were properly wrung out afore hung up there was nothing to complain of, because the blacks didn't hold on, not to crock, but got shook off or blew away of themselves."

Readers of William de Morgan settle down luxuriously when they come to such paragraphs, for his most charming revelations of comic and lovable humanity are certain sequels to his backward glances at quaint and friendly London.

The quaint and friendly, indeed, rather than the passionately beautiful or the tensely dramatic were the aspects of life which chiefly lingered in his amiable retrospect. His plots, of course, abound in incident, accidents, runnings-over, drownings, gallant rescues, even murders, but they are all so amply commented and earnestly elongated with laborious detail that what magazine editors would now call their "punch" is entirely eliminated. He could not be dramatic and confessed it. In the longest and most involved of all his novels he humbly wrote :

"I, who write, have no aim in telling this story beyond that of repeating as clearly and briefly as may be the bare facts that make it up—of communicating them to whoever has a

few hours to spare for the purpose, with the smallest trouble to himself in the perusal. I feel often that my lack of skill is spoiling what might be a good story. That I cannot help; and I write with the firm conviction that any effort on my part to arrange those facts in such order that the tale should show dramatic force, or startle him with unexpected issues of event, would only procure derision for its writer, and might even obscure the only end he has at heart, that of giving a complete grasp of the facts, as nearly as may be in the order of their occurrence."

So discursive a mind could not rise to the great moments of conflict and intensity, however apt in the accumulation of vivid detail. One seldom catches his characters in a significant or plastic attitude, and their dialogue, so natural and racy in the give-and-take of daily life, falls stiff and dead just when the imagined scene calls for its quickening. Only now and then could he put a truly tragic emotion into appropriate words, and it is but just, in conclusion, to quote one of these rarities. It is Aunt Picture's memory (*When Ghost Meets Ghost*) of seeing her husband taken on board a convict ship long years ago in the Chatham

roads. Her neighbour asks if she ever saw her husband again, and she replies :

“ ‘ Yes. Climbing up the side of the great ship half-way to the Nore. It was a four hours’ pull for the galley—six oars—each man wrist-locked to his oar; and each officer with a musket. But we had a little sail and kept the pace, though the wind was easterly. Then, when we reached the ship where she lay, we went as near as my men dared. And we saw each one of them—the ten—unhandcuffed to climb the side, and a cord over the side made fast to him to give him no chance of death in the waters—no chance. And then I saw my husband and knew he saw me. . . . He tried to call out. But the ship’s officer struck him a cruel blow upon the mouth, and he was dragged to the upper deck and hidden from me. We saw them all aboard, all the ten. It was the last boatload from the hulk, and all the yards were manned by now, and the white sails growing on them. Oh, but she was beautiful, the great ship in the sunshine. . . . Oh, but she was beautiful. I’ve dreamed of her many’s the time since then, with her three masts straight up against the blue; you could see them in the water upside down. I could not find the heart to let my men row away

and leave her there. I had come to see her go, and it was a long wait we had. . . . Yes, it was on towards evening before the breeze came to move her; and all those hours we waited. It was money to my men, and they had a good will to it. . . . Yes, she did move in the end. I saw the sails flap, and there was the clink of the anchor-chain. I've dreamt it again many and many a time, and seen her take the wind and move, till she was all a mile away and more. We watched her away with all aboard of her. And when the wind rose in the night I was mad to think of her out on the great sea, and how I should never see him again. But the time went by, and I did.' "

There is nothing in all his novels to rival the tragic simplicity of this speech : it is significant that he put it into the lips of a very old woman. It was the thought of old age which struck the most poignant emotions from his heart—old age with all its bright joys faded into a far distance and only its regrets in view, clutching even the memory of deep sorrows as a last warming flicker in the dying embers. Youth seemed to him infinitely enviable, old age infinitely pathetic. The title of his last fragment might stand for the inspiration of his whole literary work—*The Old Man's Youth*.

X

A LITTLE CLASSIC*

THE evanescence of laughter is most pathetic. Its bubbles vanish from the sparkling wine that held it so soon after it has been uncorked, leaving a sadly flat beverage to the critical palates of future generations. Wit, being a subtler and less easily disintegrated essence, does not so quickly pass away, but the buoyant bubbles of laughter, except in some rare vintages, survive but a moment the uncorking of their bottle. We may smile at the things that aroused the laughter of our ancestors, bringing our intellect and our imagination to the task

* *Bibliographical Note.*—Principal Works by Edith C. Somerville and Martin Ross: *An Irish Cousin*, 1889; *Naboth's Vineyard*, 1891; *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart*, 1893; *The Real Charlotte*, 1895; *The Silver Fox*, 1897; *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, 1899; *All on the Irish Shore*, 1903; *Some Irish Yesterdays*, 1906; *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, 1908; *Dan Russell the Fox*, 1911; *In Mr. Knox's Country*, 1915; *Irish Memories*, 1917; *Mount Music*, 1919. All published by Longmans. Other works have appeared subsequent to the death of Miss Ross and the writing of this chapter.

ing, but it is seldom that we experience spontaneously the "sudden glory" of bursting sides when we read the words which aroused it. It is almost painful to look through the files of *Punch* of some sixty years ago, for it arouses that agonised shame with which one witnesses the failure of an inferior joke injudiciously introduced into superior society. One blushes for its pitiful exposure. Nor is it any consolation to reflect that the laughter of our own day will, for the most part, seem like the cracking of most unsubstantial thorns under ghostly pots to those who come after us. Very little of the literature of the past which truly survives is really provocative of hilarity. The Falstaffian passages of Shakespeare at once leap up as if to deny this statement; but, in the first place, Shakespeare brewed one of those rarer vintages whose beaded bubbles wink ever at the brim, and, in the second place, dramatic literature can always be revived by the fresh infusion of a living actor's personality. It is the purely written word of humour which will not give that sudden jerk to our emotions which it gave on its first outpouring. We say that we can appreciate Rabelais and the comic tales of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*; we profess to revel in *Tristram Shandy*, and to find the *Pick-*

wick Papers delicious, and we are not wrong; but it is a soberer enjoyment than that which these works of art gave to their first audiences. We pick them up, certainly, when we wish to be entertained, but seldom when we wish to laugh. There was a tutor at Oxford—there may be one still—who was invariably annoyed when any of his pupils attributed a historical phenomenon to “the spirit of the age,” averring that there was no such thing. But surely he was wrong in coupling this convenient spirit with the ghosts of Stephen Sly and old John Naps of Greece, for the peculiar changes undergone by laughter are there to prove its existence. Laughter is compounded of the spirit of the age : it is excited by peculiar and irrecoverable felicities and conjunctions of temperament and environment, all of which are ingredients in that very real but intangible spirit. We can guess at this spirit, but we cannot recapture it, any more than we can recapture the light effervescence of its laughter.

Further, laughter is not a lofty emotion. The beasts, they say, have it not, but those who are little better than beasts laugh heartily. We ourselves are not so proud of our laughter that we wish it to echo through the ages, as we would have our high thoughts ring and our

tears, perhaps, drip. The heady wine that moves it is often an unworthy vintage, more like the champagne which Murger's Schaunard christened *coco épileptique* than the true Hippocrène. So it has been in the past. The shelves of libraries are full of these flat draughts from which all the liveliness that alone gave them savour has departed. Yet in all ages there have been nobler bins of these light literary wines which, for all that they no longer catch at the throat, have a more lasting quality and never entirely lose their gratefulness to the tongue of the taster. They may not have sparkled in their prime more brightly than their now neglected contemporaries, but they live for certain finer essences in their composition, wit, style, finish, colour, bouquet, or something even subtler than these, that indefinable taste which distinguishes all that has been grown on a rich literary soil, warmed by the sun of beauty and matured by a vintner who has carefully and lovingly learned his trade. Such, after exciting the laughter of the present in their youth, may in their ripeness, and even in their decline, earn the honour of posterity. They may possibly be numbered among the classics, that is to say, among the productions of any age which deserve to live as models for the future

or as peculiarly happy expressions of a bygone time. The test of a classic is what men and women of any age will always call its modernity, which means that it possesses some of those timeless qualities of greatness or artistic excellence which permeate the spirit of any age. Skill in construction and delineation, accuracy of vision, fine rhythm, perfect choice of language, happy adaptation of form to matter, sense of beauty, all these, like beauty itself, do not die. The work which holds them, even though thinly commingled, will outlive the evaporation of its bubbles, and may by their preservative effect become, if not a great, at least a little, classic.

To have done, then, with the bush which no good wine needs, I would like to taste again, in the company of the reader, what, if I may prophesy in hope rather than in certainty, may become in English literature a little classic of the future. The bush would not have been so thick had it not been, on the face of it, unusual so to greet a work that has moved many thousands of us to hearty and inextinguishable laughter. I mean the work of Miss Edith Somerville and her mourned-for second self in letters who wrote under the name of Martin Ross. Few humorists who write merely to

catch the passing fancy of the day can have been more successful or more popular : in the merely temporary quality of effervescence they can compete with any of their contemporaries. The sportsman who hates art and loathes poetry has the *Irish R.M.* and its fellows in well-thumbed copies on his bookshelves; the man who only reads for laughter and never for improvement praises these authors as highly as the most discriminating, and those who would faint at the suspicion of becoming in any way involved in classic literature will joyfully immerse themselves in "Somerville and Ross," like thirsty bibbers quaffing a curious vintage for its exhilaration rather than its quality. Appreciation has poured in upon them from all sides, from those who know and delight in the comic sides of Irish life, when treated observantly and not fantastically, from those to whom hunting and horseflesh are almost the be-all and end-all of existence, from those who treat their brains to a good story as to a stimulative drug, as well as from those who bring more discrimination to their appraisal. The devotees will often claim that they alone can scent the subtler flavour from these hilarious pages. The Irishman, unless he be of the kind that despises all light-heartedness in

writing of his country, will assert that none but he can get the exquisite appreciation of comparing the work of art with the reality which inspired it : the hunting fraternity will find it hard to suppose that one who knows not what it is to be

“ Oft listening how the hounds and horn
Chearly rouse the slumbering morn
From the side of some hoar hill,
Through the high wood echoing shrill,”

can possibly enjoy the skill shown by these authors in describing the joy of horses and the thrill of hunting. Nevertheless, the books of Miss Somerville and Martin Ross are heartily enjoyed by a host of readers who are neither Irish nor hunting people, for the simple reason that they are prompted to an explosion of laughter whenever they take up one of these stories. The bulk of these readers would wish to go no further in their appreciation : they embrace the givers of present laughter with so full a measure of enjoyment that it would seem to them unnecessary to probe any further into the chemistry of such excellence, nor perhaps would they deem it possible that any higher praise than their freely-expressed enjoyment could be looked for by any authors. Yet to my mind it is possible. While including in one's general testimony all that can be said by

the most extravagant of these admirers, the taster who is considering the cellar of English literature which is being laid down for posterity may discern qualities not so apparent to the quaffer for immediate exhilaration. It is hard to conceive it, but the bubbles may vanish : if they do, the question is, what will be left? My point is that the work of Miss Somerville and Martin Ross has the qualities of a wine that will keep.

It cannot be a great wine, for the vineyard is too restricted. The high winds of emotion have not swept over its soil, nor has the soft rain of tenderness moistened it. It will always be bright and rather dry, like Vouvray,* gay but with a little bite in it : posterity may even call it "curious." But they will recognise that it holds the authentic flavours that distinguish infallibly the finer products of English literary bins. The authors have chosen a small field, but they direct on it an accuracy of vision which is remarkable, and, seeing that they were two, a unity of vision which is a miracle. In the expression of this vision they display an unfaill-

* An anonymous correspondent was much incensed by this comparison; but he did not know the true Vouvray. Very few people do; but those who have had the good fortune to drink it, will see nothing derogatory in my comparison.

ing sureness of touch and a precision which is perfect in its admirable economy. They handle our language with a deftness and flexibility which is a rarity in itself, and their style, though always original, is nourished by a recollection of great models both in prose and poetry. Theirs is a literary equipment of the first class, solidly framed, well clothed, attractive in appearance, and ornamented with taste. They touch nothing that they do not embellish: events by their unflagging narrative power, which goes as unfalteringly as one of their choicest hunters, character by their sympathetic insight, scenery by their love of natural beauty, dialogue by their dramatic sense. It is not all Ireland that they draw, let that be admitted; they prefer to laugh, letting others weep. Yet, if the whole heart of Ireland does not beat within their pages, a part of it is there, pulsing with true Irish blood and throbbing with truly Irish emotions. Their aspect is no more that of Mr. James Joyce or Mr. Synge or Mr. Yeats than it is that of Mr. George Moore or Mr. Devlin, but, if they are justly praised for their merits, that praise cannot be diminished because they looked on Ireland with laughing eyes through a West Carbery window. Their books are literature no less certainly than

Castle Rackrent is literature, and for very similar reasons.

Well, let us taste. It is a bright dry wine, I have said. That is not, perhaps, the quality which the authors would ascribe to what they consider their best work, *The Real Charlotte*—an estimate in which Mr. Stephen Gwynn agrees with them. This is a fine sombre story of a middle-aged woman's jealousy, for Charlotte is a kind of Irish Cousine Bette. But, if the subject is comparable to that of Balzac's novel, the treatment is certainly not so, and that is my reason for not regarding this as the work by which their achievement can best be judged. It is the work in which they have aimed highest, and the measure of their success is not small, but the theme of Charlotte's jealousy and the havoc in other lives which it caused needed for its convincing development all the powers of a great tragic artist. It is with no want of recognition of the authors' artistic aims or want of sympathy with their regret at abandoning them for others less lofty that this is said; but the work of an artist can best be judged from that part of it which most nearly reaches perfection. Miss Somerville and Martin Ross most nearly reached perfection in their lighter stories of Irish life, and

it says much for their acumen that they saw the line on which their talent could naturally reach its maturity, courageously turning their backs on higher and more tragic paths likely to tax them beyond their capabilities. At the same time, it would be unjust not to point out that even in their best work comedy does not exclude the more poignant feelings. It would be the greatest mistake to regard these two writers as nothing more than jesters. Their humour is the true humour which runs hand-in-hand with pity, and the sympathy mingled with their laughter robs it of any taste of bitterness. There is a chapter in *Some Irish Yesterdays* which shows how their hearts were touched.* It treats of marriage and love, death and birth among the peasantry in the south-west of Ireland with a delicacy of feeling which is beyond praise, and shows that the writers

* In *Irish Memories* Miss Somerville says that this chapter is the reprint of an article by Martin Ross—a fact which throws some light on the respective contributions of the two collaborators. I should like to mention another passage in which these writers touch the pathetic with distinction. It is that chapter in *Dan Russell the Fox* in which, while tending a poisoned hound, the Irish mother tries vainly to persuade her younger son to propose to the infatuated young lady. He rejects her suggestion as an outrage on the lady, and sets his face towards America. As the saved hound licks her hand, “It’s no good now, poor puppy,” she says.

did not observe with the aloofness of an explorer among savages, but that for them seeing and describing alike were deeply-felt emotional experiences. The chapter opens with a memory of a wedding in the little Roman Catholic chapel of the village, a simple ceremony, after which the bridegroom hauled his wife up beside him on to a shaggy horse and started for home at a lumbering gallop. Then, in a brilliant transition by way of Tom Cashen's reflections on marriage and a glimpse of his married life, we are introduced at Tom Cashen's funeral to the bride of twenty-five years ago, "a middle-aged stranger in a frilled cap and blue cloak, with handsome eyes full of friendliness," with her ill-health, her profusion of children, and "himself" whose "nose glowed portentously above a rusty grey beard and beneath a hat-brim of a bibulous tint." Then listen to the passage which follows :

"The sunny Shrove Tuesday in early March lived again as she spoke, the glare of the sunshine upon the bare country brimming with imminent life, the scent of the furze, already muffling its spikes in bloom, the daffodils hanging their lamps in shady places. How strangely, how bleakly different was the life history sum-

marised in the melancholy October evening. Instead of the broad-backed horse, galloping on roads that were white in the sun and haze of the strong March day, with the large frieze-clad waist to meet her arms about, and the laughter and shouting of the pursuers coming to her ear, there would be a long and miry tramping in the darkness, behind her spouse, with talk of guano and geese and pigs' food, and a perfect foreknowledge of how he would complete, at the always convenient shebeen, the glorious fabric of intoxication, of which the foundation had been well and duly laid at the funeral."

From the funeral we pass again to the cottage in which "the Triplets" are holding their reception, the three day-old babes cradled in the stuffy room, hazy with the smoke of the turf fire, the crowd in the doorway, the old woman rocking the cradle :

"Obscure corners harboured obscure masses that might be family raiment, or beds, or old women; somewhere among them the jubilant cry of a hen proclaimed the feat of laying an egg, in muffled tones that suggested a lurking-place under a bed. Between the cradle and the fire sat an old man in a prehistoric tall hat,

motionless in the stupor of his great age; at his feet a boy wrangled with a woolly puppy that rolled its eyes till the blue whites showed, in a delicious glance of humour, as it tugged at the red flannel shirt of its playmate."

Such a passage in a Russian novelist would warrant ecstasies on the part of our *illuminati*: let us no less highly praise our own art when it is possible. The chapter concludes with some lights on the commercial methods of matrimony practised by the peasant class: the writers do not defend them, but call attention to the surprising bloom that is apt to spring from them. "From them springs, like a flower from a dust-heap, the unsullied, uneventful home-life of Western Ireland." "There is here no material, of the accepted sort, for a playwright; no unsatisfied yearnings and shattered ideals, nothing but remarkable common sense, and a profound awe for the sacrament of Marriage. Marriage, humorous, commercial, and quite unlovely, is the first act; the second is mere preoccupation with an accomplished destiny; the last is usually twilight and much faithfulness." The dialogue is a masterpiece throughout, epigram, piercing pathos, with humour, lively and inveterate, lubricating all. Of an

elderly couple, married by a happy thought some thirty years before, it was said, as the authors record, "their hearts were within in each other." This chapter, through which breathes all the soft beauty and humour of the soil, is a sufficient answer to those who would tax these writers with a uniform attitude of rather heartless derision or with following—what a blind criticism !—in the benighted footsteps of those who have given us the dreary horror of the traditional stage Irishman.

Then, again, there is another spirit that breathes delicately through these stories, tempering their outlines as the mists of the Atlantic those of the craggy western hillside. It is the spirit of natural beauty, which, to the hearts of Miss Somerville, herself an accomplished draughtsman, and Martin Ross, makes ever the sharpest appeal. They make the reader plainly feel that if the unconventional dignity and penetrating wit of the Irish folk clutches powerfully at their feelings, the inexhaustible beauty of its surroundings pierces to their very marrow. Quotation after quotation might be given to show their remarkable gift of rendering the scenery which has so moved their imaginations. I can only choose a few, embarrassed at the richness of the field

of choice. The last chapter of *Some Irish Yesterdays* opens with an example which it is hard to surpass :

“ The road to Connemara lies white across the memory, white and very quiet. In that far west of Galway, the silence dwells pure upon the spacious country, away to where the Twelve Pins make a gallant line against the northern sky. It comes in the heathery wind, it borrows peace from the white cottage gables on the hill-side, it is accented by the creeping approach of a turf cart, rocking behind its thin grey pony. Little else stirs, save the ducks that sail on a way-side pool to the push of their yellow propellers ; away from the road, on a narrow oasis of arable soil, a couple of women are digging potatoes ; their persistent voices are borne on the breeze that blows warm over the blossoming boglands and pink heather.

“ Scarcely to be analysed is that fragrance of Irish air ; the pureness of bleak mountains is in it, the twang of turf smoke is in it, and there is something more, inseparable from Ireland’s green and grey landscapes, wrought in with her bowed and patient cottages, her ragged walls, and eager rivers, and intelligible only to the spirit.”

Here is another landscape, the *Irish R.M.*'s view of his own demesne :

“ Certainly the view from the roof was worth coming up to look at. It was rough, heathery country on one side, with a string of little blue lakes running like a turquoise necklet round the base of a firry hill, and patches of pale green pasture were set amidst the rocks and heather. A silvery flash behind the undulations of the hills told where the Atlantic lay in immense plains of sunlight.”

What, again, could be a more delightful overture to the lifelike description of the regatta on Lough Lonan than the short paragraph which conveys in a few touches all the beauty of the scene?

“ A mountain towered steeply up from the lake's edge, dark with the sad green of beech trees in September; fir woods followed the curve of the shore, and leaned far over the answering darkness of the water; and above the trees rose the toppling steepnesses of the hill, painted with a purple glow of heather. The lake was about a mile long, and, tumbling from its farther end, a fierce and narrow river fled

away west to the sea, some four or five miles off."

In these descriptions there is no striving for elaborate effect : the authors simply place the scene before our eyes with that aptness of language which is like the unerring needle of a master etcher. To travel on the wings of Miss Somerville and Martin Ross gives one constant thrills of amazement at their hawk-like swoops after a telling phrase : they catch an apt simile on the wing with an arresting suddenness which adds moments of breathlessness to the already exhilarating flight of their rapid narrative. Instances can be picked out from any of the stories like plums from a pudding.

"In the depths of the wood Dr. Hickey might be heard uttering those singular little yelps of encouragement that to the irreverent suggest a milkman in his dotage. . . ."

"It was a gleaming morning in mid-May, when everything was young and tense, and thin and fit to run for its life, like a Derby horse. . . ."

"I followed Dr. Hickey by way of the window, and so did Miss M'Evoy; we pooled our forces, and drew her mamma after us through the opening of two foot by three

steadily, as the great god Pan drew pith from the reed. . . .”

“Old McRory had a shadowy and imperceptible quality that is not unusual in small fathers of large families; it always struck me that he understood very thoroughly the privileges of the neglected, and pursued an unnoticed, peaceful and observant path of his own in the background. I watched him creep away in his furtive, stupefied manner, like a partly-chloroformed ferret. . . .”

“Miss McRory’s reins were clutched in a looped confusion, that summoned from some corner of my brain a memory of the Sultan’s cipher on the Order of the Medjidie.”

“Like smuts streaming out of a chimney the followers of the hunt belched from the lane and spread themselves over the pale green slopes. . . .”

Though the temptation is almost irresistible, I refrain here from displaying this incisive power applied to character, notably to Irish character. The success of our authors in this respect is so notorious that further testimony is superfluous. If we have any appreciation of their art at all, the Major and the gentle Philippa, his wife, Flurry and Sally Knox, old Mrs. Knox looking

as if she had robbed a scarecrow, with her white woolly dog with sore eyes and a bark like a tin trumpet, against the inimitable background of her ramshackle mansion of Aussolas, scene of many wit-combats between her and Flurry, Miss Bobbie Bennett, the McRory family, John Kane, Mrs. Knox's henchman, and Michael the huntsman, all are as vivid to us as our dearest friends. It is worth pointing out, however, that an almost diabolical power of delineation is not the only compelling quality in these portraits. There is in their introduction of their characters that natural dramatic instinct which they have so humorously observed in their Irish neighbours. I need only instance the ingenuity by which Mrs. Knox is first heard "off," easily vanquishing in speech that doughty antagonist, an Irish countrywoman; or the introduction of John Kane in "the Aussolas Martin Cat," in two inimitable pages, which are followed by another perfect passage of comic drama, the entry into the old demesne of Aussolas of vulgar Mr. Tebbutts, the would-be tenant :

"Away near the house the peacock uttered his defiant screech, a note of exclamation that seemed entirely appropriate to Aussolas; the

turkey-cock in the yard accepted the challenge with effusion, and from further away the voice of Mrs. Knox's Kerry bull, equally instant in taking offence, ascended the gamut of wrath from growl to yell. Blended with these voices was another—a man's voice, in loud harangue, advancing down the long beech walk to the kitchen garden. As it approached the wood-pigeons bolted in panic, with distracted clappings of wings, from the tall firs by the garden wall in which they were wont to sit arranging plans of campaign with regard to the fruit. We sat in tense silence. The latch of the garden gate clicked, and the voice said in stentorian tones :

“ ‘ My father 'e kept a splendid table.’ ”

Every gathering of their countrymen—the meet, the run, the horse show, the races, the regatta, the auction—have an intensity of motion and character which is achieved not by the tiresome enumerative methods of some modern realists, but by the skilful selection of the practised artist, and by a clever condensation of observations—their only form of exaggeration—gathered over a wide range of times and places.

Finally—the word starts up all too soon—

let us praise the powerful sweep of their narrative, for it is this rapidity and staying power which sets the crown on their achievement. When they are out with the hunt, whatever be the quarry, they are as "crabbed leppers" as ever moved the picturesque admiration of an Irish hunt following. They are off at the first cry of the hounds and nothing stops them, they drop over the slaty fences, change feet on the banks, thread the rocky paths of steep ascents and career down the craggy hills, like Flurry Knox's mounts to the discomfiture of staid Saxon hunters. With them, moreover, there is never a check; they gallop hot on the scent from first to last, and run the story to a triumphant death in an ecstasy of unquenchable laughter. Their climaxes are marvellous, led up to as they are by a brilliant and sustained crescendo. Think of the *mêlée* at the end of "High Tea at McKeown's," or of the "Dane's Breechin'," with its exquisite interlude of the search for the "pin" in the village post-office; think of the finale to "Philippa's Foxhunt," with the Irish clergy and Mrs. Knox pulling the small boy out of the drain; or of Lady Knox's ominous arrival at the end of "Oh, Love! Oh, Fire!" and the escape of Sally in Mrs. Knox's pony-chaise, or

of the combined catastrophe that fell upon the Major's household in "A Royal Command." For pure art in narrative construction these finales are unsurpassed in English literature of to-day, all the more because they are free from buffoonery. Here is one that starts a movement *con brio* :

"A shout from the top of the hill interrupted the amenities of the check. Flurry was out of the wood blowing shattering blasts upon his horn, and the hounds rushed to him, knowing the 'gone away' note that was never blown in vain. The brown mare came out through the trees and the undergrowth like a woodcock down the wind, and jumped across a stream on to a more than questionable bank; the hounds splashed and struggled after him, and as they landed the first ecstatic whimpers broke forth. In a moment it was full cry, discordant, beautiful, and soul-stirring, as the pack spread and sped, and settled into line."

It is only one of many such. Let me send the reader to his shelf to take down *In Mr. Knox's Country*, and read "Put Down Two and Carry One," with its account of the events which led to Miss McRory's riding pillion behind the Major into the scandalised sight of

Lady Knox, or to expire once more over the mingling of Mrs. McRory's golden butterfly with Philippa's hat-trimming at the harvest festival ("The Bosom of the McRorys"). I am compelled to quote, for its rendering of the purely ludicrous, from the incident of Playboy's nocturnal rescue in "The Conspiracy of Silence" (*Further Experiences of an I.R.M.*). Major Yeates, as deputy master in Flurry Knox's absence, has taken the hounds over to hunt with Mr. Flynn, who, after a run full of incident, has connived at the secretion of Playboy, a fine hound of the old Irish breed, in a bedroom at the top of the house. The Major is warned of this by the youngest boy, whose gratitude he has earned by giving him a mount that day. The pair thereupon grope their way upstairs to raid the bedroom in its owner's absence :

"A dim skylight told that the roof was very near my head; I extended a groping hand for the wall, and without any warning found my fingers closing improbably, awfully, upon a warm human face.

"[It was the servant, Maggie Kane, bringing up a drumstick of a goose to pacify the hound. They open the door of the room, and

Playboy is revealed tied to the leg of a low wooden bedstead.] He was standing up, his eyes gleamed green as emeralds, he looked as big as a calf. He obviously regarded himself as the guardian of Eugene's bower, and I failed to see any recognition of me in his aspect, in point of fact he appeared to be on the verge of an outburst of suspicion that would waken the house once and for all. We held a council of war in whispers that perceptibly increased his distrust; I think it was Maggie Kane who suggested that Master Eddy should proffer him the bone while I unfastened the rope. The strategy succeeded, almost too well in fact. Following the alluring drumstick Playboy burst into the passage, towing me after him on the rope. Still preceded by the light-footed Master Eddy, he took me down the attic stairs at a speed which was the next thing to a headlong fall, while Maggie Kane held the candle at the top. As we stormed past old Flynn's door I was aware that the snoring had ceased, but 'the pace was too good to enquire.' We scimmaged down the second flight into the darkness of the hall, fetching up somewhere near the clock, which, as if to give the alarm, uttered three loud and poignant cuckoos. I think Playboy must have sprung at it, in the

belief that it was the voice of the drumstick; I only know that my arm was nearly wrenched from its socket, and that the clock fell with a crash from the table to the floor, where, by some malevolence of its machinery, it continued to cuckoo with a jocund and implacable persistence. Something that was not Playboy bumped against me. The cuckoo's note became mysteriously muffled, and a door, revealing a fire-lit kitchen, was shoved open. We struggled through it, bound into a sheaf by Playboy's rope, and in our midst the cuckoo clock, stifled but indomitable, continued its protest from under Maggie Kane's shawl."

And now, if I may close with a recollection of what is, perhaps, the most brilliant of all these brilliant narratives, I will call to the reader's mind the story of "The Pug-nosed Fox," from the same volume. Every gift of language, delineation, vigorous intensity, dramatic gradation, and swiftness of progress over a series of crises to a perfect culmination has been lavished by the authors on this story. From the misguided efforts of the photographer to take a picture of the hounds on a sweltering August day, all through the untimely chase of the old fox to the discovery of Tomsy Flood

sewn up in a feather mattress in the loft of the McRorys' stable, and the raid of the hounds upon the wedding breakfast at the moment of the entry of the guests, there is not a moment in which to draw breath. It is life itself, with all the added quickness to its revolutions and intensity to its vision that art can give. With this memory I must leave this little classic to its future, but so that art, rather than criticism, shall have the last word, a typical passage, showing the authors' ease of transition from beauty to comedy, shall close this grateful appreciation :

“ At the top of the hill we took another pull. This afforded us a fine view of the Atlantic, also of the surrounding country and all that was therein, with, however, the single exception of the hounds. There was nothing to be heard save the summery rattle of the reaping-machine, the strong and steady rasp of a corn-crake, and the growl of a big steamer from a band of fog that was advancing, ghost-like, along the blue floor of the sea. Two fields away a man in a straw hat was slowly combing down the flanks of a haycock with a wooden rake, while a black and white cur slept in the young after-grass beside him. We broke into

their sylvan tranquillity with a heated demand whether the hounds had passed that way. Shrill clamour from the dog was at first the only reply; its owner took off his hat, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and stared at us.

“ ‘I’m as deaf as a beetle this three weeks,’ he said, continuing to look us up and down in a way that made me realise, if possible, more than before, the absurdity of looking like a Christmas card in the heat of a summer’s day.

“ ‘Did ye see the HOUNDS?’ shouted Michael, shoving the chestnut up beside him.

“ ‘It’s the neurology I got,’ continued the haymaker, ‘an’ the pain does be whistlin’ out through me ear till I could mostly run into the say from it.’

“ ‘It’s a pity ye wouldn’t,’ said Michael, whirling Moses round, ‘an’ stop in it.’”

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